



# Democracy's Megachallenges Revisited

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We are living in the midst of a contest over which kind of democracy will shape the 21st century. The dominant form of democracy in the last century was based primarily on elections and representative government. This system is in trouble today. The scholarly literature tells the story: *Democracy and Disagreement*; *Demosclerosis*; *Democracy's Discontent*; *Democracy at Risk*; and *Downsizing Democracy*.<sup>1</sup> All of these studies report that democracy is facing fundamental megachallenges.

Citizens know something is wrong, although they aren't sure what it is. In the United States, confidence in government dropped precipitously in the 1970s and has remained low ever since. In response, civic organizations have launched campaigns to "take the system back." A public engagement initiative has been joined by a civil renewal movement. Each reform has brought with it an implicit notion about what democracy should mean. But the notions are different.

Where does higher education stand in all this ferment? This essay addresses that question; it is about the megachallenges and their implications for everything from research and teaching to student services. Some universities have announced that they are "engaged" universities or colleges; others seem uncertain whether

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Jonathan Rauch, *Demosclerosis: The Silent Killer of American Government* (New York: Random House, 1994); Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do About It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005); and Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

they can or should do much about how the political system operates. Nonetheless, almost everything these institutions do, whether they say they are engaged or not, has implications for politics. The *Higher Education Exchange* is in a position to explore this issue further by looking at both what is going on in democracy and what is happening in higher education.

In this concluding chapter, I'll offer my reflections on what is occurring outside the academy and what it might mean for the way colleges and universities meet their responsibilities to democracy. I am returning to a subject I wrote about for the 1999 issue of the *Exchange* on the megachallenges of democracy. At that time, I had little to say about how higher education might respond. Now, I want to revisit these challenges and say more about the way colleges and universities might engage them.

How academic institutions go about meeting their obligations to democracy is crucial. I have heard it argued that these institutions serve democracy simply by existing. But what understanding of democracy does that argument imply? It seems rather limp given the current debate over what concept of democracy will emerge in the 21st century. The key question in that debate seems to be what role citizens will play. This question makes the issue of where the academy stands critical because colleges and universities have an understanding of citizenship that is implicit in nearly everything they do, including the kind of education they provide to undergraduates, the kind of leadership they champion in leadership programs, and the services they offer to their communities.

Determining the academy's position on citizenship, however, is no easy matter. There are so many groups involved—faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and trustees. But what institutional leaders say in their conferences and publications is revealing. Little of what they discuss has to do with democracy, at least directly. The topics are familiar: costs, academic standards, fundraising, athletics, enrollment trends. Some of the issues are, however, more political: affirmative action, diversity, multiculturalism, race, free speech, and equity. And there are some fairly new subjects in the literature that also have political overtones.

Service learning leads the list, followed by civic engagement and community involvement.

Obviously, all of the political topics have implications for democracy, but the implications are different. Within the mix are a wide range of notions about self-government, its problems, and the role of citizens. In the 2006 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange*, for instance, Derek Barker identified five quite distinct understandings of democracy all grouped under one generic label—the scholarship of public engagement.<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with this variety; as has often been said, one of the characteristics of democracy is a lively debate over its meaning. I don't expect the academy to speak with one voice or take one position in the contest over what democracy should mean. Nonetheless, it would be instructive if the concepts of democracy implicit in the various political projects of the academy were made more explicit.

I say this because I believe, at some point, the debate over the nature of democracy will subside and one form or another will become dominant. Its reign may last for some time, and it will determine the role that the public is to play in politics: citizens will either be in the front ranks or on the margins. Some types of democracy promote self-rule and rely heavily on citizens; others are more institutional or procedural and expect far less of citizens. The generation reading these issues of the *Exchange* could be held accountable for what is decided. It would be exceedingly unfortunate if future generations found ours wanting because we were not sensitive to the effects that academic projects are having on the prospects for self-rule. Our discussions of higher education should be informed by what is happening to democracy, both in the United States and around the world. What is happening in attempts at self-rule in communities is particularly important to understand. Communities can provide opportunities for people to learn to be citizens by participating directly in collective decision making and problem solving.

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Barker, "Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement," *Higher Education Exchange* (2006): 64-72.

The true measure of the *Exchange's* significance will be how deeply it delves into the problems of democracy and how explicitly it lays out the implications of those problems for colleges and universities. To the credit of its editors and authors, *HEX* has already added some important insights to the current debate, discussing concepts such as “public building,” “public work,” and “public scholarship.” These concepts have developed as democratic theory has been combined with academic practice. (Several of those who have introduced these notions have elaborated on what they mean in this book.)

The repeated reference to the “public” in these concepts is significant because of the questions surrounding the role of citizens in a democracy. The word *public* can have a variety of meanings. For instance, many of these new concepts seem to refer to a single public. That is interesting because most people don't refer to the public in the singular today; they speak of publics, meaning particular groups with a common interest or identity. This concept of multiple publics is consistent with the nature of the current political system, which is built around a greatly expanded constellation of increasingly powerful interest groups. Yet references to new movements, which range from public librarianship to public journalism, suggest that we are rethinking the nature of democracy. To speak of “the public” seems to return to an earlier notion of democracy when the sovereign authority was “the People,” a diverse but coherent body politic. We need to know more about how these movements understand “the public.” Is more implied than in “public” restrooms or “public” transportation, which is simply everyone or the total population?

These movements (public history is another) are within disciplines, and they coincide with institutional initiatives to reengage citizens or serve the communities where colleges and universities are located. Such outreach efforts have attracted a considerable following on campuses. Unlike the 1970s, when something similar was attempted, there now appears to be more faculty support. In fact, many of the public initiatives are coming from faculty groups (at Penn State, for instance) or even from faculty senates (at the

University of Minnesota, for example). Having been invited to several of these faculty discussions, I have been impressed by their potential to explore the kinds of democracy that are implied by various outreach initiatives.

Whether or not it is intentional, there will be some impact from these academic initiatives. In their book tracing the growth of faculty power on campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman note that the redistribution of power brought on by the professionalization of the faculty resulted in “the promotion of meritocratic values” both inside and outside the academy.<sup>3</sup> This was not the result of a conscious decision by the academy, but it happened. So the question of which political values are implicit in the current outreach efforts is inescapable.

To accomplish what I hope to in this essay—to explore the implications for colleges and universities of the major problems in contemporary democracies—I have selected current political trends that raise troubling questions about the future of self-rule, which is the definition of democracy that I use. (Self-rule, wonderfully described by Robert Wiebe in a book by that name, came to define the American political system that developed on the early 19th-century frontier—despite the late 18th-century’s preference for a republic of representative government and not a democracy.)<sup>4</sup>

The first trend on my list is one that affects the communities where colleges and universities are located. Towns and cities are plagued by problems that grow out of the lack of a sense of community and then further rend the social fabric. These have been called “wicked” problems and were discussed in the 1999 issue of *HEX*.

A problem is wicked when the diagnosis or definition is unclear, the location or cause is uncertain, and any effective action

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (1968; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

to deal with it requires narrowing the gap between what is and what ought to be—in the face of disagreement about the latter.<sup>5</sup> Wicked problems are more human than technical and are so deeply embedded in the social fabric that they never completely go away. They are as tricky as they are aggressive. Each symptom exposes another problem in a never-ending chain.

Given these characteristics, conventional strategies of goal setting, planning, and evaluation aren't enough. When problems are wicked, a shared understanding of the nature of what people are confronting is more important than an immediate solution. In fact, dealing effectively with a wicked problem may depend on not reaching a decision about a solution early on. The ability of citizens to exercise sound judgment in the face of uncertainty is especially critical! No one group of stakeholders nor single institution can solve problems with these characteristics. These problems can't be managed unless there is a collective public that acts in a community—and keeps on acting—through a series of richly diverse initiatives.

Wicked problems challenge institutions of higher education that want to assist communities because the things the institutions normally provide, such as expertise and technical assistance, aren't always useful in addressing these deeply embedded problems, which often defy professional solutions. Some institutions now make a distinction between providing community assistance without due regard for what people say they need and providing service based on some locally defined need. And some professionals describe themselves as the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." The critical question, however, is what the professional on the side does with problems that can't be solved by professional expertise.

In the 2005 issue of *HEX*, Christa Slaton described an Auburn University project that spoke to this question. Rather than offering solutions, she and her colleagues decided to use their expertise to help a community build the civic capacity to combat its wicked problems.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The classic reference on wicked problems is Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

<sup>6</sup> Christa Daryl Slaton, "The University Role in Civic Engagement: Serving as a Spark to Community-Building," *Higher Education Exchange* (2005): 34-42.

Similar cases have also been reported in the *Exchange*. In all of them, the projects had to go beyond providing services to develop an engagement strategy that took into account the nature of wicked problems.

In the community that Slaton wrote about, economic decline and an increase in drug-related crime had devastated a rural town. The town had already been inundated with technical assistance from nearby institutions. But as soon as the service providers returned to their campuses, local people returned to business-as-usual. Slaton described what she and her colleagues did to break this pattern. First, they recognized that the problems were wicked enough that they required the “whole village” to respond; that is, they required citizens to work together to do things that no one else could do for them. That recognition informed the university’s engagement strategy. The academics backed off from offering technical assistance and proposed that citizens meet, decide what they wanted to do to revive their community, and act on what they decided. The group from Auburn offered information when asked but stayed on the sidelines so citizens could take over the playing field. My brief account doesn’t do justice to all the knowledge and skill that faculty members brought to the project, but it does show that they succeeded in breaking the old pattern; citizens did not fall back on old habits when the Auburn representatives left.

Most engagement initiatives involve just one center or department, so it will be interesting to see whether these projects bring about any changes in their university’s approach to service. Will the politics implicit in Auburn’s strategy prompt an intrauniversity examination of the kind of politics implicit in conventional outreach efforts? It will be particularly interesting to see whether the new engagement projects affect student community-service programs, which are typically based on traditional models of university assistance.

Another troubling trend affecting democracies is the propensity for moral disagreements to polarize representative governments or, in some cases, degenerate into violence. One of the most sobering realizations of the late 20th century has been that political systems

based on contested representation, that is, those that rely primarily on elections and representative assemblies, are not always effective in dealing with moral disagreements. These disagreements have split the U.S. political system into rigid camps of red and blue, and they are inflaming other countries as well, especially in the Middle East. Moral disagreements are to be expected in politics, particularly democratic politics, because the issues are fundamentally about what should be. Resolving disagreements by bargaining among partisans is difficult, especially when the disagreements are based on deeply held convictions. And as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson have pointed out, “the standard theories of democracy—proceduralism and constitutionalism ... are surprisingly silent about the need for ongoing discussion of moral disagreement in everyday political life.”<sup>7</sup> They are among a number of scholars calling for a more deliberative understanding of democracy.

Deliberation in democracy takes into account the things people consider valuable (which are moral considerations). To deliberate is to decide by weighing options for action against what people hold dear. More is on the table than what is feasible or efficient from a technical point of view. Furthermore, the goal of democratic deliberation is not an absolute and immutable conclusion but a provisional decision about which direction to follow or purpose to serve. Being provisional, the decision is open to change as new circumstances dictate.

The question for higher education is how the various forms of democracy it supports, explicitly or implicitly, deal with the inevitability of moral disagreement. Universities have numerous programs in negotiation, mediation, and other conflict-resolution techniques. All to the good! But deliberative democracy requires more; it is not a technique, per se, for dealing with crises or disagreements. Deliberation creates a continuous conversation about what is most important to people in everyday life, which is morally grounded. It is a different way to do politics that puts citizens, not just stakeholders or combatants, at the center.

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<sup>7</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 12.

In 2005, the *Exchange* reported on an experiment at Wake Forest University by two faculty members, Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, who tested deliberative democracy as a way of doing politics. It was introduced at multiple sites: in classrooms, in the campus community, and in the town where the university is located. Deliberation was not presented as just a way of conducting forums, but instead as a way of living democratically. The initial report showed that this concept of politics challenges academic institutions at every level: from the very meaning of scholarship to the nature of teaching and the character of the extracurricular program. Harriger and McMillan found that deliberative democracy calls into question all the roles professors have become accustomed to as teachers, researchers, and even citizens. In fact, the project challenged the assumption that these are separate roles.

The impact that this experiment had on the cohort of students who participated (as compared to those who didn't) was significant. As one participant said, it affected everything she did. She and her classmates developed a different sense of democracy, especially an appreciation of the need for citizens to work together. Politics, the students found, involved more than electing representatives. And that understanding gave them an expanded sense of the many ways they could be effective political actors.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge that public deliberation poses for academe comes from its epistemological implications. Deliberation creates morally relevant, "public knowledge" about what is most important to people's collective well-being. This knowledge has to be socially constructed by citizens. It is neither better nor worse than expert, scientific knowledge, just different, as the theoretical literature has recognized for some time. So the goal of public knowledge (perhaps better called practical wisdom) is to generate sound judgments about what should be done in politics. How institutions

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<sup>8</sup> Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan, "Public Scholarship and Faculty Role Conflict," *Higher Education Exchange* (2005): 17-23. The Kettering Foundation Press has recently published a book on this research, see Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).

of higher education contribute to this knowledge that people need to rule themselves wisely is an open question.

This is a question that faculty members have addressed, in what has been called “public scholarship.” The term *public scholarship* has been taken as an implicit criticism of disinterested scholarship or as a call for social and politically relevant research that is popular and not critical of existing conventions. This isn’t what public scholarship means to the faculty members that Kettering has been collaborating with. These academic members are raising different issues; they appreciate the importance of knowledge that is not immediately relevant and aren’t playing to the grandstands. They recognize the difference between the kind of knowledge people use to make sound political judgments and the kind of knowledge academics produce, and they look for any useful relationship between the two.

A Danish social scientist, Bent Flyvbjerg, has an excellent piece in the 2002 issue of the *Exchange* on how scholars can assist in the social construction of political wisdom. This wisdom develops around these questions: 1) Where are we going? 2) Is this desirable? and 3) What should be done? (Those, not coincidentally, are the three primary questions in public deliberation.)<sup>9</sup>

Flyvbjerg proposes a type of social science that would complement public deliberation. His methodology anticipates moral disagreements by including what is often excluded in research—subjective experiences, local context, and human values (the things people care about). Most important, he allows for multiple descriptions of reality and the possibility of more than one valid interpretation. Conclusions would be reached through a dialogue among those affected by the research, citizens and scholars alike. It follows from this methodology, he argues, that scholars must work to improve the conditions under which the dialogues occur.<sup>10</sup> (That is exactly what the Auburn faculty did.)

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Grattan, review of *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, by Bent Flyvbjerg, *Higher Education Exchange* (2002): 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-53.

I don't know whether any of Flyvbjerg's ideas or his practical advice have been taken up by U.S. research universities. If they have, it would be more than just interesting to know the results. The closest I have seen is in the research being done at the Centers for Disease Control, where public deliberation has been used to shape policy on dealing with high-risk, unpredictable pandemics like avian flu.

Still another political trend, one that poses perhaps the ultimate threat to self-rule, is the tendency to "sideline citizens and privatize public life," a phrase used by two scholars, Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg. They describe the numerous ways that have been devised to make a collective citizenry unnecessary:

Political elites have found ways to achieve their policy objectives without mobilizing voters. Rather than take issues to the electorate for resolution, today's contending elites attempt to outdo their opponents by litigating, [or] by manipulating administrative procedures ... that remove policy to arenas beyond the reach of their rivals. In the process, the millions of citizens who might once have been called to the aid of their parties now remain passive bystanders. Yesterday's actors have become today's audience—spectators and customers rather than citizens.<sup>11</sup>

The mechanism for dislodging citizens may be the result of a widespread perception among leaders that "the people" are ineffective or simply inconvenient. As one civic leader told us about his community, "democracy just doesn't work here."

At best, as Crenson and Ginsberg note, citizens are treated as customers to be served. Their role is to choose, much as consumers would, from shelves of political leaders, policies, and government programs. This notion of the public, critics argue, privatizes citizens in a personal sort of democracy, which leaves no place for people to exercise their collective power in the interest of the polity as a whole. Power comes instead from the many publics that are formed

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<sup>11</sup> Crenson and Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy*, 48.

around particular, rather than inclusive, interests. Governments are organized to bargain or negotiate with these interest groups.

This analysis suggests that the way academic institutions influence their students' understanding of their own citizenship is critical because of the contested notions of what citizens should do. What do colleges and universities have to say to people who feel they have been pushed out of their own political system, who feel that citizens-as-citizens have been marginalized?

A quick scan of the *Exchange*, including what I have written, didn't uncover any discussion of sidelining citizens. I was puzzled by what appeared to be a lack of attention to the most dangerous trend of all—a democracy without a public. Then I remembered that the *Exchange* had published articles on the role of professionals in democracy. And these articles addressed the role of citizens. In an August 1998 issue of the *Economist*, an article appeared that assessed the foundation's work in providing briefing books for citizens on major policy issues (the National Issues Forums series of issue books). The author of the article dismissed the foundation's efforts as naïve because, he argued, the modern world was managed by professionals. Citizens were helpless "amateurs" who could not possibly have sound opinions on any complex issue.<sup>12</sup>

The *Economist* article was extolling one of the forces that threatens to dislodge the public from its place as the final and sovereign authority in democracy: professionalism. The implication for higher education is obvious. Most professionals are trained in our colleges and universities. I suspect, however, that most professional schools wouldn't agree that they are part of a trend to push citizens to the sidelines. They would probably insist that what they teach is decidedly *not* political—including their courses on ethics. They have a point about not being political—but only in the narrow meaning of politics, which is restricted to electing representatives and making laws. Most individuals who become professionals aren't, in this sense, motivated by a political agenda; their goal is to become excellent in their field. We all appreciate a good physician or accountant,

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<sup>12</sup> "Building the Perfect Citizen," *The Economist*, August 22, 1998, 21-22.

but the professionalism that the writer for the *Economist* was applauding is a different matter. It is based on the assumption that a small group of people, because they are scientifically trained, know what is best for all of us. As more and more fields have become professional domains, the contention that citizens don't count seems logical. Yet the conflict with democracy is inescapable. Democracies are based on the proposition that, collectively, we can make better decisions about our well-being than any one person or group of people.

The sidelining of citizens can occur in the most innocent way. For instance, professionals naturally give names to problems that reflect their expertise. That is their job, and we rely on their powers of diagnosis and the remedies they offer. But there can be unintended consequences. While professionals name problems in their terms, these terms don't necessarily resonate with the names citizens use. I recall Wendell Berry's story of an economist explaining that it was cheaper to rent land than buy it, only to be challenged by a farmer who pointed out that his ancestors didn't come to America to be renters.<sup>13</sup> The economist was technically correct, but the name of the problem wasn't just profitability. The farmer had additional concerns about maintaining a way of life he valued and the independence that owning land provided.

Even though professional names are accurate, they can be so expert that they create the impression that no other names are possible. When that happens, people don't see their worries reflected in the way problems are presented, so they back off. Furthermore, the solutions that are implicit in names may give the impression that there is little that citizens can do.

Recently, I was in a discussion about what New Orleans needed to do to recover from Hurricane Katrina. When I suggested that there were some things that only citizens could do, I was challenged with a comment to the effect that only the Corps of Engineers could rebuild the levees. I was struck by how easily a technical solution had come to define a much more complex problem and how that solution put citizens on the sidelines.

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<sup>13</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), viii.

I am not suggesting that professionals have to give up their way of describing problems, but they could recognize that the names citizens use are different—and valid. That recognition would help get citizens off the sidelines because people are engaged by names that reflect their experiences and concerns. As was true of the farmer, public names capture invaluable intangibles. For instance, crime can be described in statistical terms, but people value safety or being secure from danger. And there is no number, or measurement, that quantifies feeling secure.

I need to make two crucial distinctions here. First, naming a problem in public terms isn't the same as describing it in everyday language. Public terms identify what have been called primal motives or imperatives. These are the things people consider essential to their shared future, the very ends or purposes of life, and the means necessary for achieving those ends. Our collective or broadly political needs are similar to the individual needs that Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings.<sup>14</sup> Second, naming problems in public terms doesn't result in a one-dimensional description or a single name. A community will use many names because there is always more than one concern at stake.

The discrepancy between professional and public names for problems is a symptom of a more basic tension between the politics implicit in a professional culture and democratic politics. Bill Sullivan, writing for the *Exchange* in 1996, noted that, as professionalism has been increasingly identified with expert knowledge and technical solutions, citizens have seemed less and less competent. Consequently, moving them to the sidelines has made sense. Citizens, in response, have come to see professionals as insensitive and unaware of the things people hold dear. As a remedy, Sullivan advocates a more civic professionalism.<sup>15</sup>

Today, some professionals are becoming more civic and trying to reengage a democratic citizenry in their work. And they are

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<sup>14</sup> Milton Rokeach and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, "Stability and Change in American Value Priorities, 1968-1981," *American Psychologist* 44 (May 1989): 775-784.

<sup>15</sup> William M. Sullivan, "The Public Intellectual as Transgressor?" *Higher Education Exchange* (1996): 17-22.

attempting to reconcile the professional tilt toward meritocracy with the values of democracy. The American Bar Association (ABA) is one example. They have prepared guides to stimulate public deliberation on issues that concern both lawyers and citizens.<sup>16</sup> These deliberations give the ABA insights into how citizens name problems. And citizens are drawn off the sidelines by having to make decisions about how to improve the judicial system.

I applaud civic professionalism because it recognizes the inevitable tensions in a society that is both professional and democratic (as ours is). But I doubt that it can be advanced by simply adding a course on the subject in every professional school. It might be more effective to provide students with civic experiences in associations trying to engage citizens. And academic institutions could do more to support scholars who are recovering the civic roots of their professions. There is an emerging literature to build on. For instance, Claire Snyder has written on the civic history of social science scholarship for the *Exchange*, and Scott Peters has a recently edited book that includes stories about the civic objectives of pioneers in public scholarship at state and land-grant institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Though not always tied to professional schools, new centers have developed on campuses around the country for the purpose of strengthening the ties between academic institutions and the democratic citizenry. And their efforts have been reported in the *Exchange*. More than 30 of these centers or institutes have been established on campuses to encourage the use of public deliberation, not only by professionals and associations but also by community groups.

The challenges facing democracy that I have cited are only three among many. I have concentrated on those that are fundamental; that is, those that affect the ability of democracy to function as it

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<sup>16</sup> American Bar Association, "... And Justice for All": Ensuring Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System (American Bar Association, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> R. Claire Snyder, "The Civic Roots of Academic Social Science Scholarship in America," *Higher Education Exchange* (2000): 5-16 and Scott J. Peters et al., eds., *Engaging Campus and Community: The Practice of Public Scholarship in the State and Land-Grant University System* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2005).

should. Because they damage the heart muscles of self-government, fundamental problems are different from the no-less-important circumstantial problems—poverty, natural disasters, and the like—that can plague democratic countries. Fundamental problems eventually make their way onto the pages of academic literature, and reading that literature is one way for institutional leaders to monitor the threats to democracy. I would suggest, however, that there are better, more direct ways. But these raise questions about where institutions and professionals should “stand” in a democratic society.

The drop-in, drop-out, observe, and advise relationship with communities is problematic. Institutions have to enter politics in a way that is consistent with the politics they want to promote. The drop-in strategy is more meritocratic than democratic. The embedded presence of various kinds of on-site or extension agents is potentially less meritocratic, depending, of course, on the way the agents behave. The embedded agent model certainly affords institutions direct contact with the people who are battling the threats to democracy. I said “people” and not institutions because institution-to-institution contacts already exist. Colleges and universities are often engaging local civic organizations when they say they are engaging communities. The people on the front lines fighting democracy’s battles, however, are usually at the farthest outpost of these organizations or not in formal institutions at all. Granted, it is much more difficult to establish ties with the unorganized citizen than the organized; still, the front lines of democracy are typically being held by ad hoc associations, nameless groups, and an array of civic innovators.

Unfortunately, one group of ideally embedded agents seems to be relatively unengaged in response to the fundamental challenges facing democracy; these are the trustees of colleges and universities. They live in communities and are usually active in civic affairs. Apparently, many board members see their job as representing their institutions to the public more than the public to their institutions. Or if they represent the public, it is primarily to see that funds are well spent and laws are observed. I hope I am wrong about governing boards. We have seen a few trustees at meetings on the challenges of democracy, and the *Exchange* has published one interview on

the subject with a trustee of the University of South Carolina.<sup>18</sup> But that is all we've seen.

There are numerous roles that citizen trustees could play in academic outreach. Trustees are certainly in a position to establish ties with the informal associations of citizens. And they are in a position to help connect their institutions' outreach projects to similar engagement efforts already going on in community groups, professional associations, regional organizations, government agencies, and legislative bodies. Colleges and universities that want to be more engaged might begin by engaging these fellow travelers.

As things stand now, the initiative for civic engagement is coming primarily from the faculty. They could use more administrative and trustee support. And they could benefit from ties to civic engagement efforts going on in organizations and ad hoc groups off campus. I say all of this with a sense of urgency because the stakes are high. The world is struggling with the meaning of democracy as current problems challenge old forms. Questions of where academic institutions will weigh in—and how—are inescapable. The way these questions are answered, knowingly or not, will be the ultimate measure of how accountable colleges and universities are to the public.

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<sup>18</sup> "On the Role of Trustees: An interview with William C. Hubbard," interview by David Brown, *Higher Education Exchange* (2001): 38-42.