

# The Limits of Public Work: A Critical Reflection on the “Engaged University”

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Mary Stanley

*This chapter is dedicated to the late Manfred Stanley, dear husband, trusted colleague, and love of my life, whose own work is my model of humane scholarship.*

Peter Levine’s tale of two generations of scholars is one framework for introducing the reader to the *Higher Education Exchange*. It’s a good analysis of the *whys, hows, and whos* behind *HEX*. Levine’s tale, like any effort to summarize a complex intellectual or activist “movement,” is necessarily incomplete. Given its focus, it does not address several deeply contentious and publicly known troubles vexing higher education during the period that *HEX* emerged and solidified a perspective on scholarship, the role of higher education in a democracy and the nature of democracy.

Of course a volume such as this will present many opportunities to explore those troubles as has *HEX* itself over the years of its publication. My perspective on the environment in higher education during the *HEX* years differs from Levine’s in two ways.

First, I disagree with his implied assertion that the public sphere must privilege open-ended intellectual pluralism. Openness to ideas as described by Levine, suggests to me that more theoretically coherent or ideologically informed perspectives (or some theoretically informed perspectives) are not welcome or are troubling in the public sphere. To that I take issue. I would argue the contrary, which given the scale of problems the public must confront, pragmatic openness is simply inadequate. There are historical moments when *big* abstract theories are required. No, not utopian claims or closed ideologies uncoupled from experience but *big* ideas that require a certain level of intellectual clarity, necessary abstraction, sustained critical analysis, and transparency in terms of how power might give unwarranted credence to some ideas recasting them as common sense, while undermining others as “un-American.”

Second, I have a different take on the nature and meaning of the relationship of public work and paid commodified knowledge work. Levine describes *HEX* scholars as engaged in “civic work.” His analysis of two generations of such inclined academics focuses primarily on the “civic” dimension of civic work with a nod to the transformations in paid academic labor over the same period. Those transformations appear as backdrop to his story. I argue that they should be center stage. I will argue that civic work, (aka “public work”) is the default form of dignified human work inside and outside the academy, as paid labor loses its remaining generative capacity under conditions of neoliberal globalization. Here is where abstract theory of a certain un-American sort is essential.

As presented by Levine, *HEX* authors and civically engaged faculty are rooted in a bedrock commitment to democratic pluralism and deliberative democracy and therefore critical of forms of intellectual analysis that are too totalizing and hence violative of openness. Or, it may seem too abstract and remote from the concrete lives of American citizens.

I argue the contrary. *HEX* authors like all intellectuals, like all people, use implied theories, bits of frameworks, heady ideas, thick concepts as “objects to think with.” And, given the changes in theory and practice brought to the table by scholars critical of the liberal tradition (e.g., postcolonial theorists, radical feminists, queer theorists, advocates of poststructuralism and postmodernism), there are a lot more concepts out there. Why bolt from those scholars who frankly offer to work with the public to put the theoretical pieces together in public spaces in public? Not as part of an insider agenda to transform the world but rather as in, “Wow! If you look at things from outside the liberal frame, you might make slightly better sense of your experience and understand what all that lefty stuff going on in Latin America is all about. And maybe why so many throughout the world reflecting on their experience, decide the United States is an imperialist nation.”

Given the historical moment we are in and the scale of American action in the world, such fresh perspectives can certainly be useful.

The civic renewal movement is exactly such an effort to help citizens theorize from their experience. *But* it refuses to take on

liberalism in its present globalizing form and builds, from my point of view, a blunt wall against some ideas, ignoring them because they are not derived from a presumed American democratic tradition. It does not step outside the lines of the *really big* cognitive frame that Louis Hartz called the “Liberal Tradition in America.”

But that liberal tradition is being challenged within the American ivy commonwealth and throughout the world. Hence the froth and angst of the culture wars.

The culture wars are mentioned in Levine’s account of *HEX*. And yes, I like his description of how civically engaged authors came to celebrate diversity as a positive good essential to a democracy and the production of knowledge. However, reading his description of diversity, it is not clear what might have catalyzed *HEX* authors to develop such a careful defense of it.

Intense arguments over the canon, about what’s in and what’s out, were surface manifestations of the slow geological shift in the meaning of knowledge, who controls it and for what purposes over the *HEX*’s years. Such controversies are aspects of any systematic analysis of higher education at present, in the past and surely in the future. They are often not pretty and they are thick with abstractions much as their concrete manifestations—more faces that look like America in more centers of power—may imply activist and pragmatic localized action. In short, someone was talking the talk. New theories about the nature of human experience were essential in prying open public spaces. Introducing new and disruptive ideas just might be a form of praxis. Isn’t that one aspect of teaching? Isn’t that at least in part, what universities “do”?

My contributions to *HEX* were neither notable for their evenhandedness and civility nor were they thick narratives of public practice and collaboration. They were in fact designed to be disruptive. Anomalies that they may have been, I think they were important and in rereading them, I think they still are. So I’ll revisit my concern with the relationships between and among public work, academic work, and paid labor. Levine’s piece rolls past the unpleasant and deeply problematic aspects of those relationships. That absence of a critical and theoretically abstract approach to the conundrums of work is, as noted above, my

second difference with his analysis of *HEX*. So I will focus on that missing story in his account of *HEX*. That story includes the larger political economy in its contemporary neoliberal globalizing form.

### **What Is Work Worth Doing? What Does Higher Education Have To Do with This Question?**

In Levine's account of two generations in the academy, he lightly wanders into generational motives for entering what used to be quaintly called the "life of the mind." What makes the work of the academy (another quaint term), work worth doing? Why do people put up with macaroni and cheese and student loans even unto Social Security, for a form of work vaguely suspect by a society that may or may not be deeply anti-intellectual? Or in any case, a polity whose gut practicality makes academics seem by definition, woolly headed?

And what does higher education have to do with work in general? Everything of course. Higher education squares many circles. Not just for those who like to read books. It keeps a global and national political economy looking briskly meritorious, fairly dispensing keys to the kingdom of the good life at least at the individual level. For example, O'Toole and Lawler in their 2006 book, *The New American Workplace*, include the modest hope that every worker will become wily and strategic in navigating the new global world of work. Their advice? Educate up. Continually and unendingly. Institutions of higher education (not-for-profit and for-profit alike) will provide those wise workers with just-in-time skills and expertise over a lifetime. No rest for the weary!

There does appear to be a societywide consensus (and "hard" evidence supposedly demonstrating an "education premium") that higher education matters deeply in terms of paid employment. If higher education had nothing to do with paid work and the status that attends some, albeit increasingly fewer jobs, it wouldn't be a site for the energy and angst that appears to consume parents attempting to launch their children and institutions competing for their, ideally high-scoring, tuition-bearing daughters and sons.

The individual tales of woe described by journalist Alexandra Robbins in her 2006 book, *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids*, is enough to get parents, admissions officers, and kids alike reaching for mighty strong antacids.

Further, higher education is still where many, though certainly not all, of the base blocks of knowledge are quarried. Blocks of knowing that support entire structures of professional practice in every aspect of contemporary existence. Structures that are premised on knowledge “out there” that can be discovered, utilized, taught, packaged, and sold. In short, (using a dollop of Marxist theory here) knowledge that can be alienated from its creators and commodified.

*“Obviously, one aspect of academic professionalization was, and continues to be, to undermine popular confidence in the ‘lay’ mind through the creation of professional status and a monopoly of expertise.”*

(“Proles, Entrepreneurs, or Public Scholars?,”  
HEX, 1998.)

But when David Mathews asked the contributors to this volume to think about how scholarship and professional expertise might be deployed in such a way as to not overwhelm, alienate, or diminish the dignity of citizen “clients,” I think we were all reminded that in general the contributors to *HEX* over the years, have spent many, many vexing hours examining their consciences regarding the disabling nature of expertise in a democratic polity regardless of its political economy.

That inquiry included scrutiny of their own expertise as scholars and members of disciplines and professions. How awful that what you might love to do, your own work worth doing, you find complicit in another human being’s diminished sense of self? Even more so when you believe that education, at least under present conditions of neoliberal globalization, is the remaining mechanism for upward mobility for those you know did *not* have a childhood spent preparing to show up at the door of an elite institution’s admissions office.

This deeply felt and openly expressed examination of conscience regarding the functions and functioning of expertise in a democratic society may be the single most valuable contribution of *HEX* to thinking about higher education.

And so *HEX* authors in their scholarship and practice signal a willful retreat from what expertise and professionalism promised to provide them as scholars. That is, a zone within which they “own” their labor, can hone their competencies and can experience themselves as creative human beings. *HEX* scholars present themselves as willing to share in the name of democracy the very thing—the agency bestowed by expert knowledge that comes with advanced education—that their students are told will ensure them, their students, a work life of creativity and autonomy. And it might be added, take a hatchet to expertise!

What compensates academics, scholars, and professionals for the loss of status and agency that attends the sharing of the expertise, authority, and intellectual privilege that supposedly accompanies a PhD? The story I read in *HEX* is one of steady fleshing out of a new form of work conducted outside the ivied walls and a celebration of the joys that attend that work. Levine terms it *civic work*. It is also termed *public work*.<sup>1</sup>

But when we think of public work in a democracy, we don’t usually think “Public Plumber.” So why do we assume that there is a Public Scholar, a Public Journalist, a Public Intellectual? This is where the larger dialogue on the external pressures bearing upon higher education comes into play.

Much has been written to date about the work lives of faculty. Foundation-sponsored academic conferences, organizational meetings, and sessions within annual disciplinary meetings have focused on the impact of neoliberal market values on the institutional, disciplinary, and global organizations and contexts within which faculty labor and which constrain and shape the work they do. Books, articles, and think pieces have emerged from those conferences, meetings, and disciplinary sessions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boyte, “Public Work: An interview with Harry Boyte,” and Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life*.

<sup>2</sup> Brint, *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*.

What seems unavoidable is the conclusion that the middle-class effort to use expertise as a way to sustain privilege and solidify its status, distinguishing its paid work from that of mere “laborers,” is under siege. Even among the professoriate. Academics are certifiers but the certified are not immune from the process of capitalist de-skilling. In 1998, I presented in *HEX* a view of faculty and institutions of higher education as challenged and transformed by the not very subtle pressure of market values, incentives, and more ominously, disincentives.<sup>3</sup>

Faculty, I argued, were increasingly positioned to view themselves as entrepreneurs within their various worlds of practice and institutions and hustle accordingly or else. The nightmare alternative; mere worker bee teaching machine, just another weary member of a vast and growing training sector, proletarians in the knowledge factories of postindustrial, globalizing late capitalism. For a powerful fleshing out of my argument, faculty all over the world might wish to reflect upon David Noble’s 2002 book *Digital Diploma Mills*. Men and women who prepare and decorate a kingdom of knowledge no longer govern it; are no longer members of an association of producers unless that is, as Noble suggests, they consciously resist those transformations in higher education that seem on first analysis to be inevitable; beyond human or political control. They should do so both for themselves and potentially all workers. But they must first understand the stakes involved in their resistance and maintain a clear-headed appreciation for the tenaciousness of what they’re resisting. And it isn’t just a “bad apple” dean, harried university president, or shortsighted state legislature.

I’ll readily admit that scholars and faculty are not deskilled in the same way that the demand for increased efficiency and productivity press upon the factory worker who having just learned the computer, discovers the robot’s taken his job while he was learning CAD at the community college. You can’t take away a PhD but you can judge its base of knowledge “old.”

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley, “Proles, Entrepreneurs, or Public Scholars?”

There are many ways to diminish status and discount productive labor, tailored to every job site! As the knowledge-making and disseminating “line” picks up speed, the slackers get identified and, tenured as they may be, they move on down that line, are invited to teach Freshman Intro, nudged from the center of institutional governance and become the “dead weight” that neoliberal assumptions about the atavistic nature of tenure predict. Or, more concretely, do *not* get that merit raise.

For those “gypsy” academics without tenure or for adjuncts, forget dignity, appreciation, health benefits, or time to enjoy either teaching or a social world of work.

For them, moving into the public sphere may well be both a strategic choice but also a way to find work worthy of one’s intellectual passions. At least until they discover that the NGO sector and government work have their own pressures and market-based demands bearing upon them.

The dreamy image of the study, the crackling fire, and the classics text opened in the lap while the professor, lost in subtle reverie regarding the perennial foibles of the human condition, sips port is more joke than desired.<sup>4</sup>

Zippering from foundation headquarters to professional meetings to wherever the frontiers of knowledge need a boost or a university a temporary visiting star, “Fast World”<sup>5</sup> entrepreneurial faculty appear more Donald Trump than rumpled tweed no matter the quaintness of the actual costume they wear. Fast World does not encourage wasteful reflection. Unless that is, an organizational expert can “prove” that reflection or a “democratic” workplace or managerial practices that seem superficially democratic (until the pink slip arrives) enhance some aspect of production. Unless reflection creates “value-added,” reappears in positive “outcomes,” helps achieve a “benchmark,” or can be tracked by other profit-driven “assessments,” such as the old standby, “the bottom line,”

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, et al., *Steal This University: The Rise of the New Imperialism*.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*.

dump reflection. Perhaps only academic “star power” guarantees time for reflection.

Many discussions of the way faculty and institutions can maintain their “agency” are premised upon the assumption that entrepreneurship variously understood, is the main, if not the only means. Even the titles of recent books on higher education, for example *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered*, suggest that market forces must be accommodated, indeed deployed, to salvage the core mission of higher education.<sup>6</sup>

Seldom is the question asked whether entrepreneurship even in its more de-fanged forms and democratic civic life are compatible, although the assumption that they are floats through many discussions of how communities and nations, not just institutions of higher education, can restore their collective agency. But of course, that same institutional and individual agency, hard won as it is through entrepreneurial efforts, is perpetually undermined by globalization in its manifest forms, personally confronted as an unending speed up of work, leisure, family/community life, and even childhood, generated in part by the knowledge producing and disseminating industry itself. Chillingly at least to some, higher education as traditionally understood, may be an increasingly smaller “share” of that industrial sector. Its fixed campuses becoming a metaphoric knowledge industry rust belt as educational virtuality and direct linkage to employment and productivity become the markers of a good education worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

Many who write on institutional change in higher education are quick to add to what otherwise seems their bleak assessment of the future of the professoriate in terms of the nature of the work professors do and the conditions under which they do it, that faculty and institutions of higher education have longstanding cultures and “institutional logics” that work to preserve the heartland. The

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<sup>6</sup> Zemsky, et al., *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered*.

<sup>7</sup> Cox, “None of Your Business: The Rise of the University of Phoenix and For-Profit Education—And Why It Will Fail Us All,” 15-32.

heartland is the core of academic life and constituted by those domains (frequently described as the disciplinary homes of faculty or the liberal arts tradition) of practice still controlled by faculty and ordered by a lingering commitment to truth through research, increasingly refined methodologies and peer-reviewed scholarship. "We are a university!" is not an uncommon response to one more invitation to faculty, colleges, and universities to collaborate with corporate interests, or other "peripheral" institutions, to commodify academic labor or produce value-added knowledge products.

### **Work Worth Doing: *HEX* as a Site for Reimagining the Work of the Mind as Public Work**

The contributors to *HEX* are drawn I think to a vision of democracy that redeems labor of all sorts. It is a vision grounded in pragmatic, incremental social change within the many civic workshops of civil society. It suggests that if your paid labor is a source of angst, you can step into the public sphere or civil society, engage in public work, and feel yourself stretched to your full humanity.

*But* having given up, or set aside, an overt use of left or macro-analysis like Noble's, to illuminate the experiences of actual citizens working for money under conditions of neoliberalism, *HEX* authors have fallen back upon a pragmatic, at times anarchistic version of American liberal democratic exceptionalism and avoid as does Levine, socialist analysis, or newer theoretical approaches in the humanities and social sciences. Its anarchistic affinity is revealed in a public practice that does not easily embrace state power as a way to balance the increasing power of global economic institutions (understandable at a time when state power is ballooning in many spheres in the name of "national security") but rather discovers in civic associations and civil society fertile ground for civic renewal and creative collaborative problem solving. Whether "fessing up" to its debt to Marxism or not, the vision behind the civic renewal movement does reintroduce the ideal of an "association of producers." Producers who labor not in the neoliberal globalizing marketplace but work together in civil society. Work worth doing moves from

paid work to public work. From the production of widgets to the coproduction of public goods.<sup>8</sup>

Further, in the name of narrative thickness (all citizens have a story to tell), it avoids the use of concepts that seem initially unrelated to citizens' concrete lives.

One person's contemporary hymn to a vital civil society, could be another's updated version of old anarchist dreams. But anarchists told their story in the context of a multiplicity of political theoretical frameworks within and outside liberalism, including socialism. The civic conversation must have been decidedly more edgy in Jane Addam's Hull House!

Deliberative democracy, civic engagement and renewal, and finally your university situated in the commons as against constituting its own separate ivory commonwealth, and you've

got a type of work that conceivably supports human dignity and democracy. But I ask whose work? And why the shift from the more traditional meanings of academic work to those that seem to jump on board the democracy train? And is this approach to academic practice and public work sufficient to derail or even slow down that other train? A neoliberal train, which seems to be gathering on board the whole of humanity, forcing its passengers to rush ever faster to a temporal and spatial world that just might destroy our capacity for community, muting our ability to ask whether such a world is generative of a life worth living and if so, for whom?

*"In the effort to professionalize the mind and certify knowledge, faculty in higher education may have inadvertently undermined the very idea of education as a transcendent public value, a good in itself broadly valued and needed in a democracy."*

(*"Proles, Entrepreneurs, or Public Scholars?,"*  
HEX, 1998.)

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<sup>8</sup> Sirianni and Friedland, *The Civic Renewal Movement*, 135.

You can hope like the devil that you can reembed the market in civil society and make government a “catalytic” collaborator<sup>9</sup> with citizens but when an angst-ridden business person has to close the plant she may feel the only story she can tell her sister citizens is that, like the weather or the devil, the market made her do it. I say, better to bring on a rich, thick “redistribute” justice frame that does not describe justice as only a struggle over scarce resources but includes a full bore analysis of “culture work,” “paid work,” and “civic work” supported by rich contemporary strains of theory in the social sciences and humanities, old-fashioned Marxist materialism and the experiences of non-Americans with other ideological and cultural orientations in their heads. No, you do not need to assume false consciousness on the part of anyone. Let’s start with a discussion of why people might resist the temporal demands of such a conversation rather than assume they’re not interested or can’t understand it.

Come on! We had Eugene Debs on the presidential ballot! We can stretch our minds beyond a cramped, cowed liberalism. The civic renewal movement may not be enough to help us do so.

Harry Boyte, a nationally and internationally known scholar-practitioner, and frequent contributor to *HEX*, argues that public work should be premised upon an older tradition of craft.<sup>10</sup> His claim does suggest that the plumber’s practice might be a better place to theorize public work than the scholar’s. But what is missing in much of Boyte’s admirable writings and creative practice presented as a model in the pages of *HEX*, is the overt acknowledgment that capitalism’s “job” remains to eliminate the craft tradition by expropriating individually held tools, deskilling out of existence worker competencies and eliminating exactly what the craft tradition once brought many actual workers. Even the plumbers’ craft is being rationalized, their work commodified into units of service. Can the craft of public work really compensate for the loss of craft in paid labor? And for whom is this possible? Most citizens confronted

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Boyte, *Everyday Politics*.

with the necessity of paid work, understand a great deal about how globalization impacts that work. And it is not to encourage craft!

Who then will shape the commons as theorized and practiced by *HEX* scholars? Who will create a public worthy of democratic rhetoric? Frankly who has the time? The contributors to *HEX* and the civic renewal movement it seems. And it would be nice if work in this commons would “count” for tenure and promotion. Even Boyte in his celebration of craft as a model for public work focuses on professionals whom he claims have lost their attachment to the public. He does not focus on plumbers. Of course, he does not mean that they should be excluded from public world making. But he also neglects to note that professionals have hard-won professional expertise as a buffer against the creative destruction of capitalism.

*“All the shifts, moves, and reallocations of resources large and small, that institutions of higher education do to adapt to and accommodate the power of market institutions are signals and invitations to students to do the same.”*

(“The Packaged Self, Modern and Postmodern Persons in Late Capitalist Times: The Challenge to Higher Education,” *HEX*, 2000.)

In short, professionals have the possibility of reimagining their labor as public work *because* they have expertise that, at least temporarily, is valued by the public, rewarded by the market, and scampers ahead of the productivity churn that seeks to transform that same expertise into lower paid “homogeneous abstract labor.” Professionals have a degree of agency that a service or industrial worker, whose only recourse may be the collective agency of a union, may not. Professional agency rooted in expertise, is nonetheless in the cross hairs of globalization. And many of the young still flocking to institutions of higher education expect that cutting-edge expertise is what they will find within those ivied walls or they will go elsewhere.

A vital, broad (even world-spanning?) liberal civil society with its invitation to professionals to become coproducers of public goods, might signal an acceptance (without question or reflection), that the forces of neoliberalism cannot be stopped. What could function better to support a particular vision of the *good life* defined by liberal capitalism, than a deep acceptance that you are perpetually on the move as a worker and citizen? So get over it! As with paid labor, keep your skill-set fresh, your civic muscles toned. Prepare yourself for civic life by carrying on your back from community to community, job to job, a civic mind-set that can be deployed in any community rather like a paid career that under neoliberal assumptions, demands perpetual spatial and temporal catch-up. And, like the country club for the upper-management family of the 50s, or the PX for those soldiers on the fringes of empire (any time), civil society should be up and running everywhere you go and look a lot like the civil society you just left. Listen:

If a movement promises to expand partner relationships spatially, so to speak, it also promises to multiply pathways for the development of civic careers over time. A movement that can enlarge our mental maps of kindred forms of democratic work enables citizens to locate opportunities for continued contributions as they move through the life course, change jobs, relocate to different communities, or shift their issue focus and priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Like the paid worker tuned up and ready to pack that U-haul, this broadening civil society will make sure citizens will be less likely to lose their civic identity and “motivation” as a result of “substantial gaps in civic activity.”

Time carved out for a rich life embedded in civic associations in one place is less and less available to more and more people, including those in professions whose certification standards keep ramping up. Though people do still try to remain attached to whatever community they parachute into, and *HEX* is filled with examples, the way in which paid labor presses in on family, persons,

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<sup>11</sup> Sirianni and Friedland, *The Civic Renewal Movement*, 128.

and community life must be, and seldom is, addressed and theorized outside the bottom's up partnership among civic associations that is the signature of the civic renewal movement.

Workers and "ordinary" citizens are already aware of the conditions, demands, and contradictions in how paid work is presented and enacted in a late capitalist society. Who doesn't know in their gut that losing a job and then a house and then a community as one wanders looking for a decent job with health benefits and a good 401K plan, cannot be good for the kids?<sup>12</sup> Or, that the pay-off in consumer goods and materialistic values if one finds that job, cannot be good for the souls of the kids either. We know that most paid work is not assigned based upon considered democratic reflection on what is work worth doing or most needed by a society. Is the civic renewal movement really ready to address those experiences? And how long will it take to act on them, given that childhoods all over the world last only so long, or not at all?

Boyte is correct, I think, in trying to mobilize both citizens and faculty to think politically, but his version of relational politics skirts issues central to macropolitical economy and lacks the theoretical scope needed to address them. *But* if we want leaders, including university and college presidents, and citizens to take on the *big* public issues of our times, we must ask them their views on contemporary neoliberalism as experienced not just locally but nationally and internationally as understood through many lenses not all made in America.

Any college or university president can join the local Chamber of Commerce, sit on several citizen committees dedicated to local economic development and discuss how to survive and compete with other cities, regions, states, or communities. But without contributing to and sustaining a deep national conversation on neoliberal globalization, the larger political economy becomes the weather; out there, not of us. Or the "thing" gentlemen and ladies don't discuss.

Students and citizens themselves have focused on big issues and made such framed analysis of them including the worldwide political economy. But student and activist citizens cannot maintain

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<sup>12</sup> Uchitelle, *The Disposable American: Layoffs and Their Consequences*.

a conversation with the mainstream that explores the credibility of their own ideological claims regarding the political economy unless mainstream institutions support that conversation and their well-meaning elders and leaders are willing to join it for the long haul.

Clearly national security and war have become the *big* issues of our time. Nonetheless the practices and assumptions that support neoliberal globalization as a natural process continue apace and are for the most part, not explored through a critical lens or from theoretical positions outside liberalism. There are many conversations in both the United States and throughout the world about neoliberalism, its linkages to imperialism or in-the-world economic practices that challenge it. Surely university and college presidents can charge their institutions and faculties to go ever deeper into the conundrums, contradictions, and tensions globalization brings to all institutional sectors, including their own. They can invite, even urge, faculty to share their practice, research, and intellectual analysis with the public. They can ask again and again how globalization does or doesn't advance democracy, create the conditions for work worth doing, and provide structural support for human flourishing in the United States and elsewhere, even as they know that their institutional survival may be at risk should they ask too much or do too little to meet market demands.

This may not be such a risk.

There are examples in the world of academic leadership that suggest that a subtle macroconversation is taking place. I do not mean at the insider disciplinary level at which it is hardly subtle. There neoliberalism and globalization are concepts and practices to be embraced or challenged theoretically, methodologically, and with disciplinary focus. I mean at the level of an institution's conversation with the public at all levels—local, national, and international. I am certainly not alone in arguing that such a subtle conversation is being conducted creatively within higher education particularly in the humanities and around diversity.<sup>13</sup> But I want it loud and proud.

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<sup>13</sup> Veninga and McAfee, *Standing with the Public: The Humanities and Democratic Practice*.

I'll use Syracuse University, where I taught for almost 20 years, as an example of how the culture wars might generate a below the radar critical analysis of neoliberalism in a way that does open up space for *big* ideas. Perhaps my example suffers from the same unwillingness to address macropolitical and economic structures directly. Indeed Syracuse University chancellor Nancy Cantor told me that a critique of neoliberalism is *not* how she frames her practice.

But Chancellor Nancy Cantor has begun a deep critical analysis and conversation with many constituencies over the role of higher education in a democracy. That conversation does acknowledge that higher education is being transformed and shaped by large-scale, macro forces and practices. However, Cantor celebrates that higher education has *also* been transformed by the hard, hard work of intellectual and theoretical analysis, particularly around diversity.

Cantor has signaled at the national level that the world of the academy is not what it once was because of diversity. Not just the diversity of student skin color, sexual orientation, and eye shape, deeply important as those are. But also because of the diversity of intellectual frameworks and theories that have emerged over the last three decades. The two cannot be uncoupled. The thickly theoretical arguments that were used to support the diversity of persons in higher education, have implications for how the human world is and should be ordered, how resources are or should be distributed and power is or should be justified.

They were normative, at times radical, theories but their advocates aspired to intellectual rigor and honesty. Yes, such academics may have become demoralized because their work was often represented to them as gobbledygook, irrelevant to the very society they hoped to challenge and improve (the poor MLA!). A charge raised not just by conservative critics on a screed but even by friends in the academy.

Yes, you can find traces of such contemporary theoretical moves in the perennial great works of the past but you can also find them in the oracular traditions of East Africa and how much the better we are for that! How would we have known how cultural traditions become invisible, marginalized, or degraded without seemingly airy post-colonial theory?

Cantor, I think, meant this far richer view of diversity when she articulated a vision of diversity that helped salvage one mechanism for guaranteeing it, affirmative action. Cantor, as many know, was closely involved in the University of Michigan's defense of affirmative action in the *Grutter* and *Gratz* cases decided by the Supreme Court in 2003.

Universities are spaces for the production of critical nonalienated or alienating ideas. Cantor's practice by celebrating the shops that craft complex, provocative ideas, offers the public a conversation that respects ideas as themselves public goods.

## **Conclusion**

*HEX* writing is informal, fresh, willing to reveal the situated self of the writer. It's the writing of academics who uncouple themselves from the train of expertise and professionalism, at least for a time. There is no doubt that these same authors can sling the hash with their peers, write for other venues, play or have played the tenure game. But they seem to find in public work something more satisfying, more deeply attuned to what it might mean to do the work of the world than spending their days primarily polishing their expertise. Perhaps, they find work in the commons to be an opportunity to use their poetry, their capacity for humor, their delight in learning something they are not skilled at, their awe at collective world making. As cocreators of the commons, they become crafters and artists, coproducers of public goods that are not easily reduced to commodities.

But if they ignore the necessity of a public and sustained inquiry into why and how our present political economy functions as it does and why and how market values distort not just their own institutions but every institution, our work and your work, they will have settled for bottoms-up, incremental changes.

To keep such a macroanalysis in one's pocket because it might seem too abstract or scholarly, is to enter the commons fearful of the capacity of sister citizens to understand and reflect upon their own experiences. If we enter the commons as citizens, we have to believe that minds can move, especially our own. Education itself is about whether anyone can be taught anything in any manner

that freshens the mind and expands the soul as against being a modestly cynical exercise in credentialing. Deep frameworks do change and consciousness of their existence in our own souls, helps change them.

But beyond the assertion that citizens and faculty are complex beings capable of thinking the world anew, there are brute facts as well. Sweet as the *HEX* vision may be, we know that outside those free spaces, factories close, industries move, communities crash, governments fall, power corrupts, war happens, resources are allocated, laws are changed, and people's lives are improved or shattered by those changes.

*HEX* scholars and practitioners seem to harbor the hope that if they help create a democratic commons, a vital and pluralistic civil society, everyone will come and recognizing each other's humanity beneath the diversity, together begin the long march to recapture many institutional sectors, transforming seemingly rigid structures into polities alive with democracy. If they lose the sense of governance and control in their own institutions of higher education as market pressures and norms reshape those institutions, they can look fondly at civil society hoping that the democratic values nurtured in its cultivation can bleed back into both market and state, transforming them and ultimately higher education as well.

If once in those free spaces, they have to bite their tongue so the plumber can speak, so be it. But maybe the plumber can tell the story that opens up the broader conversation about political economy and the nature of work in our times. Maybe then the scholar will share with the plumber what she knows about the history of labor, about Eugene Debs and Emma Goldman, about the way in which our contemporary world-spanning, neoliberal political economy so vast and seemingly uncontrollable, is a human creation, was once otherwise and could be different. Perhaps the plumber already knows this.

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CHAPTER TWO

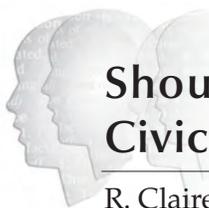
# The Civic Roots of Higher Education

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Should Higher Education  
Have a Civic Mission?  
Historical Reflections







## Should Higher Education Have a Civic Mission? Historical Reflections

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R. Claire Snyder

What does it mean to say that higher education should have a civic mission? The term *civic* is defined as “of or relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship, or community affairs.” The term *citizen* is not just another name for an individual; *citizen* is a membership category that connects the individual to a self-governing community, a city, a republic. The term originated within the democratic tradition of civic republicanism, which dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, to refer not to all who live in a community but specifically to those responsible for public affairs. While contemporary liberal democracy—dedicated to protecting the rights, liberties, and interests of individuals—uses the term *citizen*, it has vacated the category of its historic meaning, responsibility for civic participation. Consequently, the liberal citizen has individual rights but few duties.

To answer the question of whether higher education should have a civic mission requires us to answer the question behind the question: what does citizenship mean? In other words, the theory of democracy people implicitly or explicitly assume directly affects their vision of citizenship and so also shapes their view of higher education’s mission. Today liberal democracy with its emphasis on individualism appears to be the dominant vision of democracy in America. But that was not always the case. In the early years of American history, the civic republican vision of democracy played an important role, which is why the United States was founded as a republic. Not reducible to representative government, a republic is a sovereign political community of equal citizens who work together to govern themselves for the common good. Civic republican political theorists ground their belief in popular sovereignty on the Roman principle that “what affects all must be decided by all.” Thus, they believe that citizens must

actively participate in self-government, if they want to keep their republic.

So to ask whether higher education should have a civic mission in the true sense is to ask whether it should take an active

*"It seems to me that all research-scholars could benefit from grappling seriously with the civic import of their own research agendas."*

*("The Civic Roots of Academic Social Science Scholarship in America," HEX, 2000.)*

role in preparing students for citizenship, active participation in self-government. Today, many institutions of higher learning no longer have a civic mission in this sense.

While they may serve public purposes by preparing students for participation in society at large, preparation for active civic or political participation is not necessarily a part of higher education. For example, my own university does not have an explicitly stated civic

mission, although it strives to "prepare students to address the complex issues facing them in society and to discover meaning in their own lives," as well as to "encourage diversity" and "serve the needs of the student body." If asked whether the university serves civic purposes, the administration would no doubt say that it does: It prepares students to contribute to the world as informed and productive "citizens" (read: individuals), no matter what field of employment they pursue. But this vision does not entail any particular responsibility for participation in the practices of self-government.

While educating students is certainly an important service to society, an increasing number of folks within the academy believe that higher education could do more to instill in students the importance of civic participation in particular, which is needed in order for democracy to work as it should. That is, if democracy requires more than just an arena in which individuals can pursue their own interests and if citizenship involves more than just expressive individualism, then what does higher education need to do? If democratic

citizenship involves acting collectively to achieve common goals, then what does higher education need to do to prepare citizens to take on this task?

Democracy and higher education have influenced each other throughout the course of American history. Changes in democratic society affect higher education, as it adapts to meet public needs and demands, while at the same time, higher education shapes democratic society by the way it educates citizens and leaders. In a more republican era, citizens were actively involved in self-government, and higher education played an important role in civic education. Over the course of the 20th century, as America transitioned into a liberal democracy, with an emphasis on individual choice making and fair procedures, higher education came to operate on what William Sullivan calls “a sort of default program of instrumental individualism.” In the last decade or so, however, a burgeoning movement that seeks to resuscitate active citizenship has developed within American democracy, and this has been accompanied by parallel movements within higher education aimed at making its mission more traditionally civic. This essay overviews the evolving history of higher education and democratic life in America and argues that higher education needs to revitalize and reconfigure its traditional civic mission in order to prepare students for active participation in self-government.

### **Religious Publics and Congregational Colleges**

Even before the birth of American democracy, institutions of higher education played a central role in public life. The original model of American higher education was the *congregational college*, and throughout the colonial period (and beyond), the congregational college model of higher education served three important public purposes. First, the congregational colleges produced community leaders. Second, they gave those leaders the type of knowledge considered necessary for those responsible for public affairs. Third, the congregational colleges educated future leaders with a curriculum of Christian humanism because they saw normative thinking as central to the process of decision making about public matters.

The Puritan community of the Massachusetts Bay Colony founded Harvard College in 1636 in order to train leaders, those who would govern its Christian commonwealth. The nature of Puritan society directly affected both who its governors would be and what they would study in college. Because the early Puritans wanted a perfectly united community and a public life devoted to serving God, their religious and political spheres were naturally interconnected. Nevertheless, because of Protestant theology and a desire not to replicate the traditional Anglican fusion of church and state, they simultaneously made a conceptual distinction between the two spheres. Thus, while citizenship in the Puritan community required membership in the Congregationalist church, and church leaders took a lead role in political life by sermonizing on Election Day and consulting with civil magistrates, ministers were barred from holding political office and the courts were nonecclesiastical.

Due to the nature of their community, the Puritans needed the leadership of both ministers and lawyers, and so they founded Harvard College to train these men to tend to public affairs. The first institution of Puritan civil society, Harvard developed as a distinct entity, separate from both church and state, yet subject to the authority of both. Although Harvard College trained both sacred and civil leaders, all its students were educated with the same curriculum, a classical (liberal arts) curriculum, which included the great works of moral philosophy, theology, history, and literature. Interestingly, although the study of Scripture took a central place in Puritan education, so did the great pagan works of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, among others.

The Puritans considered a classical curriculum that foregrounded normative issues both appropriate and necessary for those who would tend to public affairs—for three reasons. First, the humanistic tradition transmitted to community leaders knowledge of accepted truths as revealed through the great classical and religious texts. Second, studying the liberal arts nurtured in students the inherent political capacity for reflection, a capacity essential to good government. And finally, the classical curriculum was designed to instill in students an excellent moral character.

Like Massachusetts Bay Colony, other homogeneous religious communities also founded colleges to train those who would govern. During the colonial years, a multiplicity of Protestant sects led in turn to a proliferation of church-dominated colleges. The Anglicans founded William and Mary in 1693. The Connecticut Congregationalists founded Yale College in 1701. This pattern of congregationally based colleges accelerated during the first Great Awakening which produced the College of New Jersey (Princeton) founded by the Presbyterians in 1746, Brown founded by the Baptists in 1764, Queen's College (Rutgers) founded by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1766, and Dartmouth founded by the Congregationalists in 1769. In addition, an Old Light coalition with Anglican leadership and Presbyterian support founded King's College (Columbia) in 1754 and the College of Philadelphia (the University of Pennsylvania) in 1755. Despite denominational sponsorship and control, however, these institutions were liberal arts colleges not divinity schools *per se*; they served their particular communities by producing public leaders.

During the 18th century, the character of public life in the colonies began to change. Population growth and colonial sprawl, increased immigration of new European ethnic groups, intermarriage between different sects, and the expansion of commerce, all worked together to create a larger and more heterogeneous public realm—a public realm populated by not only “Yankees,” but also the Scotch-Irish, Scots, Germans, and Dutch, not only Congregationalists but also Presbyterians, Quakers, Baptists, Lutherans, Mennonites, Anglicans, members of the Dutch Reformed Church, some Catholics, and a small number of Jews. This burgeoning heterogeneity combined with the flowering of the Enlightenment, as well as monarchical demands for religious freedom and suffrage for Anglicans, created an increasingly tolerant atmosphere in 18th-century America. Moreover, even Puritanism itself began to relax as a second generation, raised under more prosperous conditions and without the hardships of religious persecution, came of age.

Princeton was the first college conceived within the newly formed heterogeneous public. It was the first college chartered in a province with no established church, was the first to receive no state

aid and to remain free of state control, and was the first to have intercolonial rather than exclusively local influences. Although deeply influenced by its Presbyterian founders, Princeton was hospitable to students from a variety of sects. As American public life was becoming more diverse, institutions like Princeton emerged to accommodate these changes.

### **The American Republic and the Emergence of the People's Colleges**

As the American Revolution approached, the colonial colleges continued to offer a classical liberal arts curriculum foregrounding normative issues—but with some important modifications. First, higher education began placing a greater emphasis on teaching students to exercise their own personal judgment rather than just absorbing the great truths—a pedagogical method more appropriate for a self-governing republic. Second, as the American public became more concerned about questions of political legitimacy, the colonial colleges followed suit by beginning to allow discussions of overtly political topics. Third, colleges continued to train community leaders for civil society, but these leaders less often filled the pulpits and more often did the practical work of planning the revolution. And finally, the trend toward greater attention to politics accelerated with the addition of political philosophy to the standard curriculum. One might say that the liberal arts were becoming the civic arts.

American political ideals during the 18th century were becoming less religious and more republican, and many colleges followed this trend. The Enlightenment's emphasis on universal reason undergirded international struggles for popular sovereignty and republican self-government rather than clerical or monarchical rule. Out of this Enlightenment context came the American Revolution and the constitutional establishment of a civic republic, instead of a Christian commonwealth. This revolutionary approach to government raised the question of how morality would be upheld without an official church. Thomas Jefferson, following the democratic republican theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believed that a civic republic must provide citizens with a common set of moral values

to replace traditional religion and that colleges and universities should play a key role in disseminating this new civil religion. Jefferson wanted the secular government to organize a common educational system, including public universities. Republican government as the instrument of the public should support non-religious institutions of higher education with the civic mission of educating both citizens and public leaders, all of whom would play a role in the self-governing republic.

The changes inaugurated by the American Revolution led to the creation of a new model of higher education more appropriate for the new democratic republic: the *people's college*. Examples include Thomas Jefferson's secular University of Virginia, women's colleges, land-grant universities, and historically black colleges. Because the people's colleges prepared students for participation in self-government, their public purposes constitute a civic mission, in the full sense. The civic mission of the people's colleges continued to include the three public purposes traditionally embraced by the congregational colleges—the production of public leaders, the dissemination of important knowledge, and the development of the type of normative, reflective thinking considered necessary for good public decision making—however, they also added to the traditional list. First, the people's colleges increased public access to higher education beyond an elite group of men, thus beginning to democratize it. Second, rather than simply nurturing the reflective capacities of students, the people's colleges pioneered the idea of applying knowledge to practical public problems, connecting higher education to the collective work necessary to produce a commonwealth or republic, which Harry Boyte has termed *public work*.

In 1819, Jefferson succeeded in founding the University of Virginia, a state-sponsored university that did not have an official religious affiliation. To fend off accusations of godlessness, Jefferson invited particular denominations to set up divinity schools nearby, so that students could get whichever sectarian viewpoint they chose, while also receiving the benefits of a heterogeneous, civic university. (The denominations did not take him up on his offer.) Nevertheless, while the University of Virginia represents a new

model of higher education, it was also an anomaly; the vast majority of colleges continued to be denominationally founded and controlled.

*“Ironically, women’s exclusion from electoral politics helped transform them into active citizens.”*

*(“Women, Social Science, and Public Work During the Progressive Era,”  
HEX, 2005.)*

With the exception of U.Va., during the early 19th century, congregational colleges that were very closely linked to particular communities rapidly proliferated. Between 1800 and 1861, the number of colleges increased tenfold—and that is only counting those that actually survived. Communities wanted their sons to be educated locally, and having a local college became a key component of civic pride. On the whole, however,

because particular communities tended to be religiously homogeneous, the rapid expansion of locally rooted colleges also reinforced their denominational character. Although many of these “colleges” were actually more like glorified high schools, the point remains that in the early 19th century, communities saw institutions of higher education as central to civic life.

During the early republican period of American history, women’s education gained importance. The ideal of “republican motherhood”—that women have a special civic role to play in educating future citizens—bolstered the cause of women’s education. In 1792, Sarah Pierce founded the first women’s college, the Litchfield Female Academy in Connecticut, which existed until 1833. That same year, Oberlin College was founded by liberal Congregationalists as the first coeducational institution in the country, and by 1835 it was racially inclusive as well. A number of women’s colleges were founded during the 19th century, including George Female College (Wesleyan) in 1839, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College in 1840, Mills College in 1852, Vassar in 1861, Hunter College in 1870, Smith in 1871, Wellesley in 1875, Spelman, the first college for African American women, in 1881, Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke in 1888, and Barnard in 1889.

The Morrill Act of 1862 and the resulting land-grant movement broadened the civic purposes of higher education in three major ways. First, the land-grant colleges were founded to serve the “agricultural and industrial masses”—90 percent of the American population at that time—and so greatly democratized access to higher education. Second, these institutions combined the liberal arts curriculum with an agricultural and mechanical education, which would enable students to return to their local communities and engage in the “public work” of community problem solving. Third, as Scott Peters has argued, the land-grant colleges pioneered the idea of the “socially-engaged university,” a direct contrast with the German-inspired model of detached universities that would come to dominate during the 20th century. These colleges continued the tradition of training those who would govern public affairs, but who those people were, what they studied, and how they applied that knowledge, expanded in accordance with public needs.

During this same time period also came the first historically black colleges which sought to bring the traditional benefits of higher education to black communities. While the first black college was founded by a Quaker in 1837, most were established after the Civil War. Founded by white philanthropists in conjunction with black churches, these new private colleges, like the land-grant institutions, combined a traditional liberal arts curriculum aimed at nurturing the capacity for reflection and creating a strong moral character with the practical skills and knowledge necessary for black community problem solving. These colleges strove to train the leadership necessary for black community autonomy, in this case primarily teachers. Of course, given the circumstances most of these “colleges” were actually more like secondary schools—as was the case with many white religious schools, as noted above. Nevertheless, the important point here is that black communities saw these colleges as central to citizenship.

### **Liberal Democracy and the Modernist Research University**

The third model of American higher education, which William Talcott calls the *modernist research university*, departs markedly from

both the congregational college and the people's college. Directly influenced by the German ideal of the detached university, this new model developed in the context of many watershed changes in the nature of American public life and significantly altered the face of higher education in America. While these modernist research universities continued to produce public leaders, these leaders would come to be understood primarily as experts and professionals, rather than moral leaders or active citizens. While the modernist research universities continued to provide future leaders with important knowledge, the curriculum began to foreground the ostensibly impartial natural and social sciences, rather than the explicitly normative approaches of religion and the humanities. And finally, while the modernist research universities continued to teach the type of thinking necessary for public decision making, an emphasis on scientific objectivity and professional expertise began to eclipse the traditional focus on philosophical reflection and deliberation. The modernist research universities were part of the modernist response to modernization.

The emergence of the modernist research university relates directly to changes in American public life. In the latter part of the 19th century, the abolition of slavery, the emergence of modern economic classes, an increasingly diverse new immigrant population, and the growth of cities, all resulted in a much more heterogeneous and conflictual American public, and fear of this increasing diversity led to a variety of attacks on popular sovereignty, including the Progressive emphasis on professional governance through the use of social science as a way of transcending politics. At the same time, the unfolding of industrialization and the expansion of the American market created the need for a modern state to regulate industry and commerce and for professionals to staff the new bureaucracies. In the end, the great Progressive dream of harnessing the new professions and social sciences for the common good ultimately ushered in the "professional politics paradigm"—the idea that the public must be governed by experts and professionals.

The idea of professional politics fits much better with a liberal model of democracy than it does with the more participatory

tradition of civic republicanism. Indeed, the republican tradition includes a deep suspicion of professional elites. For example, during the American founding, the republican antifederalists insisted that many people should take turns serving as representatives because they feared the creation of an aristocracy, which could undermine the fragile new republic. And like their republican forebears, they vehemently opposed the creation of a professional military, preferring militias comprised of citizen-soldiers. A republic requires an active citizenry.

In contrast to this, the liberal model of democracy emphasizes individual interests rather than active citizenship. While some individuals may choose to pursue an active political life, many prefer to spend their time on other things, like business matters, for example. Indeed, specialization and the division of labor are hallmarks of economic liberalism, which developed alongside political liberalism. Liberal democracy does not emphasize an engaged citizenry and has no problem delegating governmental duties to professional politicians, as long as they are ultimately accountable to the people. In fact, Talcott emphasizes the connection of the modernist research universities to the procedural model of liberal democracy, which came to dominate American politics during the early 20th century.

The modernist research university emerged concurrently with the professional politics paradigm. As we have seen, prior to the creation of the modernist university, higher education focused on conveying a finite body of knowledge that came out of the classical humanistic tradition. The goal was to nurture the reflective capacities of students and to instill in them an excellence of character. However, with the development of science came the idea that professors could actually produce new knowledge, an approach undergirded by the German university model that was developing around the same time. Consequently, professors began specializing in particular areas in which they would generate original scholarship and eventually become experts.

Many, like the members of the American Social Science Association, hoped that the new field of social science could be used for social reform, that it could provide objective solutions to the myriad

of new social problems and political conflicts plaguing American society. However, the early concern with using knowledge for social reform soon came to conflict with the ideal of objectivity, and the originally unified approach to social science fragmented into specialized academic disciplines (e.g., economics, sociology, political science), each of which claimed authority over a particular segment of reality.

By 1915, the increasingly influential modernist universities had, for the most part, broken with the traditional normative concerns of higher education. This break marks a shift from a philosophical and values-based approach to public life to a scientific and professional one, and it must be understood as a part of a general epistemological shift from religion to science that was going on in America during these same years. It also illustrates a transition from the republican ideals of an engaged citizenry, the common good, and collective action to the liberal vision of individualism, private interests, and specialization.

With the ascendancy of the modernist research university, the civic mission of American higher education began to change. The invention of public opinion polls, the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, mass support for communism and fascism, and the increasing relativism within the academy, all led professional elites to question the valorization of popular participation in politics. Some even proclaimed the public “irrational.” What’s more, an emerging suspicion of “indoctrination”—a reaction to totalitarianism—made universities reluctant to teach any values in any substantive way, even civic ones, and reinforced the need for scientific objectivity.

### **The Paradox of the Community Colleges**

Ironically, the community college movement arose out of the desire of elite universities to protect themselves from “the masses.” In the words of James Russell, dean of the Columbia Teachers’ College, “If the chief objective of government be to promote civil order and social stability, how can we justify our practice in schooling the masses in precisely the same manner as we do those who are to be our leaders?” In order to protect university research and professional

training programs from the onslaught of the supposedly ignorant public and to prevent the creation of an overly educated workforce, administrators at elite institutions like Columbia and the University of Chicago proposed the creation of two-year colleges offering the public vocational training. While these “junior” colleges would offer a college-prep option, two-thirds to three-quarters of junior college students were expected to track into terminal vocational programs.

Interestingly, citizens did not want vocational education; they wanted a traditional liberal arts education, and so people refused to enroll in the vocational tract. In fact, until the 1970s, only 25 to 30 percent of students ever opted for vocational training. Junior colleges appealed to the public only as stepping stones toward traditional four-year institutions. Consequently, out of an elitist attempt to insulate higher education from the public came the proliferation of two-year liberal arts colleges—the birth of the community college move-

ment, a version of the people’s college. And in the tradition of the land-grant institutions, these new community colleges sought to expand access to higher education, nurture the capacity for reflection through a traditional liberal arts curriculum, and prepare students to engage in public work—this time in cities as well as in small communities.

*“The ideal of objectivity increasingly eclipsed the civic value of public engagement on which the American Social Science movement was built. In short, academic social science scholarship lost sight of its original civic purposes.”*

(“The Civic Roots of Academic Social Science Scholarship in America,” *HEX*, 2000.)

### **Democratization during the Cold War**

Changes in American politics and public life that occurred after World War II directly affected the evolution of the modernist research university. It was during this period that liberal individualism

became the dominant principle of American democracy, as the country engaged in the cold war against Communist collectivism. Higher education began a period of major democratization, in the sense of becoming accessible to more and more citizens, beginning with the Truman Report (1947) and the subsequent GI Bill. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act proclaimed that “the security of the Nation requires the fullest development of mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women.” This act further expanded federal programs of institutional and individual financial aid. With massive federal assistance, the number of two- and four-year institutions of higher education multiplied. In addition, racial and religious barriers to admission were officially ended.

While the academy’s massive postwar expansion did in fact lead to the largest democratization of higher education in the history of the world, this expansion was justified by the cold war idea that we could undermine potential support for communism among working people by providing individuals with the opportunity to achieve personal prosperity. Consequently, cold war universities began to pioneer the idea that higher education should serve the public by advancing the career goals of individual students, rather than by preparing them for civic participation *per se*. This change corresponded with the accelerating shift towards liberal individualism and what Michael Sandel calls the “procedural republic,” which simply leaves individuals free to pursue their own interests.

Second, cold war universities continued to focus on the practical application of higher learning, but the focus tipped towards serving economic and military needs, rather than preparing citizens to engage in “public work.” In any event, American higher education continued preparing experts and professionals for leadership positions, but, as William Sullivan notes, they increasingly educated them using a “default curriculum” that stressed instrumental individualism, positivism, and the fact/value distinction, rather than maintaining the traditional emphasis on citizenship, civic values, and philosophical reflection.

Thus, despite the greatest democratization of higher education ever realized, American higher education became further

disconnected from its traditional civic mission. While a college education was becoming widely available to members of the American public, the content of that education had shifted. The curriculum began to focus less and less on nurturing civic capacities and more and more on serving the professional and vocational interests of individual students. So while colleges and universities increasingly focused on producing experts and professionals, they deemphasized the historical goal of educating citizens to participate in democratic self-government.

The reductionist push to turn colleges and universities into credentialing services for individual students moved higher education away from its traditional civic mission, yet the dominant “economic model” did not end higher education’s long civic history. Instead, a movement has developed within higher education that seeks to revitalize and reconfigure its traditional civic mission. This new trend began to develop during the 1960s. For example, the (white) student movement focused much of its attention on democratizing higher education in terms of access, content, and control. That is, in 1961 Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization that wanted American democracy to become more participatory, criticized universities for their lack of civic mission and their service to the military-industrial complex. Bemoaning the apathy of most college students, SDS argued that the mind-set of their peers was produced in part by the type of education they received at college: “Apathy is not simply an attitude; it is a product of social institutions, and of the structure and organization of higher education itself.” They specifically criticized the academy’s overemphasis on objectivity and specialization and pointed out the ways the university reflects the norms of the larger society, even as it helps shape them.

In addition, the civil rights movement, including the black student movement, also sought the democratization of higher education. In 1962, James Meredith became the first African American student to enroll in the University of Mississippi, protected by federal marshals. In 1963, despite the efforts of George Wallace, Vivian Malone and James Hood registered for classes at the University of

Alabama. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited state colleges and universities from discriminating on the basis of race. The creation of black studies programs in the late 1960s (and women's studies in the 1970s) extended the academy's commitment to democratizing higher education.

Yet while allowing all citizens access to higher education and including their concerns in college and university curricula should have a central place in any truly civic vision of higher education, democratizing admissions does not necessarily move higher education beyond liberal individualist notions of citizenship and reconnect it to a civic (republican) mission. Consequently, many of the concerns expressed during the 1960s continued to fester and fed into the creation of service-learning programs 20 years later. During the mid-1980s, many educators were becoming increasingly concerned about the media portrayal of college students as materialistic, self-absorbed, and uninterested in helping their neighbors. In response, the presidents of Georgetown, Brown, and Stanford founded Campus Compact in 1985. They believed, however, that public perceptions of college students were false. Many students at their institutions were involved in community service, and the presidents believed many more would follow suit if given the proper encouragement and supportive structures.

### **After the Cold War: Toward a New Civic University?**

With the end of the cold war, American higher education faced a new opportunity to reconfigure its role in public life. As Bill Richardson put it in 1996:

Higher education played a major role—albeit a discreet one—in winning the Cold War.... Well, we've won the war.... [Therefore,] one of the critical challenges for higher education is to redirect our knowledge and our resources in the service of rural communities and urban neighborhoods. In fact, it may be these investments that prove the true test and value of our research and outreach programs. Can we, for example, make a difference in the lives of people where they live? Can we build the capacity of people to play a central role in

finding their own solutions? And, can we impact public policy that creates both economic and social opportunities for people to improve the quality of life?

Responding to this challenge, a colloquium of university and college presidents issued a “Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education” (1999). This document calls for the creation of a “national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education,” so that our colleges and universities will once again become “vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy.” This declaration built directly on the very similar “Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities,” which was issued the previous month by Campus Compact, the American Council on Education, and a wide variety of other organizations and individuals.

Since its founding, Campus Compact has developed into a “national coalition of more than 950 college and university presidents—representing some 5 million students—dedicated to promoting community service, civic engagement, and service-learning in higher education.” Subsequently, in 2004 the American Association of State Colleges and Universities started the “American Democracy Project,” focusing on institutions not affiliated with Campus Compact. This project is “a multi-campus initiative that seeks to create an intellectual and experiential understanding of civic engagement for undergraduates” at member institutions and “produce graduates who understand and are committed to engaging in meaningful actions as citizens in a democracy.”

The burgeoning movement towards resuscitating and reconfiguring the civic mission of higher education relates to a number of changes in public life. First, during the last decades of the 20th century, politics became a battlefield. The so-called “consensus” of the 1950s broke apart during the 1960s, as the nation found itself torn over questions of race and gender, war and peace, sexual liberation and traditional morality. The politics of divisiveness gained steam during the 1970s, when evangelical Christians entered politics en masse in opposition to many of the changes spearheaded by new social movements of the 1960s, including the Equal Rights

Amendment, lesbian/gay rights, abortion, and religious issues, among other things.

*“My hope is that through historically informed public reflection on the proper relationship between the public and its colleges, we might be able to hasten a reconnection of higher education to public life. Then perhaps colleges and universities can once again meet public needs, this time through facilitating the hard work of public-building and by fostering the practices of deliberative democracy.”*

(“The Public and Its Colleges: Reflections on the History of American Higher Education,”  
HEX, 1998.)

The resulting “culture wars” accelerated with the end of the cold war, when conservatives and others gained greater political space to turn their attention more fully toward perceived problems inherent in American culture. In 1992, Pat Buchanan declared, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” Media coverage of the culture wars portrayed the public as hopelessly divided into two warring camps, and this highlighted the need for people to come together and find common ground.

Second, partially in response to the culture wars that threatened to pull America apart, many citizens began calling for a more deliberative approach to political and social conflict. For example, in 1981 National Issues Forums (NIF)—first called the Domestic

Policy Association—was founded to foster deliberation and give citizens a larger role in setting the normative direction for public policy. Over the past 25 years, NIF, “a network of civic, educational, and other organizations, and individuals, whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in America,... has grown to include thousands of civic clubs, religious organizations, libraries, schools, and many other groups that meet to discuss critical public issues.”

Finally, the already burgeoning civic movement gained momentum, as studies revealing low levels of political and civic engagement began to concern a lot of people, particularly educators. For example, in the 1996 presidential election, less than half of voting-age Americans went to the polls (49 percent), reportedly the lowest turnout since 1924. Congressional races fared even worse; the self-proclaimed “Republican revolution” of 1994 was authorized by only 38 percent of eligible voters. Worst of all, vitally important presidential primaries have attracted as few as 5 percent of voting-age Americans.

In addition, political participation beyond voting has declined. Robert Putnam argued in “Bowling Alone” (1995):

Since 1973 the number of Americans who report that “in the past year” they have “attended a public meeting on town or school affairs” has fallen by more than a third (from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent in 1993). Similar (or even greater) relative declines are evident in responses to questions about attending a political rally or speech, serving on a committee of some local organization, and working for a political party. By almost every measure, Americans’ direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education—the best individual-level predictor of political participation—have risen sharply throughout this period. Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities.

In addition, while relatively stable for the last 50 years, “political knowledge levels are, in many instances, depressingly low,” particularly among “women, African Americans, the poor and the young,” as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter explain in *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (1996). Moreover, “as the amount of detail requested increases and as less visible institutions or processes are asked about, the percentage of the public able to correctly answer questions declines.” Newspaper reading has declined markedly, especially among the young. Stephen and Linda Bennett find that while in 1966 sixty percent of first-year college students thought “keeping up to date with political affairs” was “essential”

or “very important,” in 2000 only twenty-eight percent thought so — “the lowest percentage” since the freshman-year survey began and particularly striking in a presidential election year.

In response to these changes in public life, “democratic theory” developed as an academic field within higher education that explicitly seeks to strengthen American democracy. While Benjamin R. Barber’s *Strong Democracy* (1984), Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), and Jürgen Habermas’ *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans. 1989) constitute foundational works in the field, it wasn’t until the 1990s that democratic theory really took off. During that decade, Amatai Etzioni was pivotal in developing and popularizing communitarianism, which seeks to empower communities and revitalize public life. Michael Sandel popularized the communitarian critique of liberalism with his book *Democracy’s Discontent* (1996). That same year, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson published *Democracy and Disagreement*, making the case for public deliberation. Many other authors also played an important role in developing the academic field of democratic theory. These academic ideas both shaped and mirrored changes in the public sphere and gave intellectual support to efforts to revitalize higher education’s civic mission.

### **A Fork in the Road**

Today we are in a period of tremendous flux, and we face the proverbial fork in the road. Will American democracy continue down the path of liberal individualism and partisan conflict, even if that means important public problems that require collective action will remain unaddressed? Or will we move in a more participatory and deliberative direction? While higher education in many ways mirrors the larger society, it also plays a role in shaping society as well. If people want a more civically engaged democracy that does a better job of addressing public problems, higher education should once again explicitly embrace a strong civic mission and play its historic role in helping democracy work as it should.

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CHAPTER THREE:  
**Public Work:  
The Perspective  
and a Story**

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Public Work: Civic Populism  
versus Technocracy in  
Higher Education

Public Work at Colgate:  
An Interview with  
Adam Weinberg

