HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
A RETROSPECTIVE
The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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FOREWORD

Deborah Witte

For more than twenty years, this journal has strived to be a place where anyone concerned about the role of higher education in democracy—faculty, administrators, students, and everyday citizens—might exchange ideas, perspectives, and practices in an effort to make democracy work as it should. We think of ourselves as part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture for all citizens. If you have been a frequent reader of this journal or a regular participant in Kettering research exchanges over any of these same twenty years (and add a decade to that for some of you!), then you know that questions are the coin of the realm. The way in which Kettering conducts its research gives questions a central role. And naturally, good questions lead to answers that lead to the next questions, and the next answers, and on it goes. We hope not ad nauseam.

With many research questions at the core of Kettering’s work, this journal has attempted to highlight the stories of practices (both successful and unsuccessful), personal experiences revealed through incisive interviews and essays, and research experiments shared and theories posited that have provided answers and furthered insights into the many questions.

The metaquestion that drives the mission of this journal and its editors, however, is and has always been this: What should the relationship be between the academy and the public?

The Higher Education Exchange began with the idea that there is a growing distance between the higher education community and the larger community of the public. The college campus may be considered a microcosm of the whole of society, and any discussion of campus and community is necessarily a discussion about how we might live together in the larger community. David Brown, in his essay “The Public/Academic Disconnect,” first suggested this growing gap between higher education and the public. And so we reprint that essay from 1995 to begin this retrospective issue.

The Kettering Foundation’s research has been focused on putting the public back into the public’s business, and its entire research agenda has this notion of public politics at its core. Readers of this journal also know that KF’s interest of study is not really higher education. Kettering’s interest is in putting the public at the center of the higher education-public relationship and getting at the problems-behind-the-problems in the relationship.

Harry Boyte, through his original thinking on public work, has
provided a cogent way to think and talk about what the public contributes to shared civic life. His ideas have helped Kettering theorize a balanced relationship between the public and its institutions. In the essay “Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Civic Learning for the Working World,” Boyte makes a case for understanding the public as a contributor, not simply a consumer, in the community-university relationship.

Other questions that we have explored follow directly from the journal’s metaquestion and help to add depth and nuance to understanding how and why higher education might align itself to the work of the public. These subquestions cluster around a handful of major ideas that this journal has explored over its history. Some may call these trends, but I think Kettering’s commitment over these many years speaks to more than “trendy” interest and concern. These ideas include public scholarship, civic engagement and service learning—both within and outside the curriculum—university-community partnerships, and the civic mission of the university.

In our work, we talk about the problems of democracy and problems in democracy. Higher education is good at addressing the problems in democracy. Innumerable college and university centers and institutes hold colloquia and conferences each year addressing such problems as poverty, health care, civil rights, and others. Many universities consider this part of the service or outreach that connects them to the communities they border. But it’s the problems of democracy that most concern my colleagues and me at the foundation. These are the problems like citizens sitting on the sidelines of the political system, with no way of entering the process except through voting, or citizens’ distrust of institutions that were primarily designed to aid citizens in their work of governing themselves.

Bernie Ronan, in a reprinted interview from 2011, suggests that higher education take a lead in developing a civic curriculum that focuses on the dimensions of practical wisdom through deliberation, the bonds of community or friendship, and the freedom that comes from complementary public action. Ronan outlines a litany of efforts by colleges to create opportunities for students to begin to learn deliberative, civic skills that may be antidotes to the problems of democracy Kettering is committed to addressing.

Over the decades, the theme of public scholarship has emerged as the journal’s major calling card. In most issues, we’ve featured essays from faculty who are experimenting with a different way of relating to the community—both the university community and the community of citizens beyond the campus. We’ve featured a few articles from students who have been caught up in the excitement (and disappointment) of what it means to be a public scholar. We’ve been pleasantly surprised by the numerous examples of
universities that have created partnerships with community organizations to practice public scholarship. Today, we would call them engaged universities, a term that wasn’t in vogue when we began this venture. I’d like to think we had a hand in creating that term and in its attending practices becoming more commonplace.

Public scholarship encompasses many concerns, such as the disconnect/divided life of the scholar-citizen, the consequences of specialization and professionalization on our campuses, and the need for communication and dialogue, especially deliberative dialogue, between scholars and the public. In issues of this journal, we have explored, from a theoretical point of view, the idea of public scholarship as a public-making activity that seeks to join the public with the academy in pursuit of the good life and a stronger, more effective, encompassing democracy. We have tried our hand at defining and describing it with some limited success and many articles address the “doing” of public scholarship. We’ve highlighted many projects, programs, and curricula that have one or more of the characteristics that make up the idea of public scholarship and the new connections that institutions are forging with the public.

Ten years ago, we published a piece by a young faculty member, Christa Slaton, that has reverberated through the foundation’s work ever since. In a piece from the 2005 issue, reprinted here, she tells of uncovering a major disconnect between the way a university approached community problems and the way in which the community itself thought about its problems. Her insight was to insist that university scholars relate to the community by standing with them, not for them, when solving community problems together. We discovered through the work of Slaton and others that higher education is accustomed to seeing and relating to many publics. Students and their parents are one public, focused—much like clients—on a return-on-investment metric. University faculty is another entity, who, when thinking of service to community, often want to do research on a community not with a community. The neighborhood or community around the university is another public, usually an adversary, rarely a partner. Even more unfortunate is that when the public, in turn, looks at higher education, it sees mostly malaise, inefficiencies, expense, and unfulfilled promises.

Along this same vein, more recently we’ve been able to share the story of the Living Democracy project, written by its codirectors Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley. In a pioneering approach to civic engagement, these faculty members are using the community as a classroom to give students a more dynamic and true learning environment. They have put into the action the insights learned from other experiments, especially those like Christa Slaton’s.
They learned from others’ work that the experience for students must be embedded in the community in order for the learning to be authentic. This authenticity, as well as the learning, comes through in the stories of some of the students in the project. As in many essays written from the student perspective, HEX readers have learned from their students as much as they have from their colleagues.

Conversations about epistemology, and its attendant meaning for professionals, have also been a recurring theme for the journal. Closely allied to concerns about faculty and classroom curriculum, professionalism is often seen as a stumbling block, not only for faculty but also for the students who seek to become faculty themselves. Claire Snyder-Hall has contributed several pieces to the journal over the years and her most recent piece—“Anti-Civic U,” which chronicles her movement through and out of the academy—provides a fine example of the dilemmas confronting faculty as they navigate in an institution that rarely seems to deliver on its promise of an engaged learning community. It is also reprinted here.

Of every institution that has a role to play in public life, Kettering asks this question: What are you doing to support and legitimize the work of citizens as they go about creating and building democracy? Unfortunately, Kettering has learned through our research that many institutions—and higher education is among them—do very little to support the work of citizens. Institutions can be extremely self-referential, often carving out a small, professionalized niche for themselves within the larger society. It’s no wonder the public rarely thinks to turn to these institutions as partners in their public work, or that higher education, as a case in point, rarely seeks out the public. Kettering asserts that the academy needs to ask itself, is simply wishing to serve citizens enough? Why do so few communities engage with universities around anything but technical or expert knowledge? Higher education, working on behalf of the public, can be somewhat arrogant and as a result, citizens resist engaging.

And yet HEX has been able, over the years, to share the stories of some of those institutions and their faculty who take the civic mission question seriously. One of these is Marguerite Shaffer, an American studies professor who, in an interview that originally appeared in the 2008 issue, called for more attention to the community-building aspects of a college education for every student. Her insight that higher education is creating students who can critique and break down theories, but who have no idea how to build community with others, has helped Kettering understand the need to enlarge traditional service learning beyond the current models. She asserts that it is the skills of citizenship that higher education should be concerned with.
Through the years, *HEX* has sought to be part of the continual learning that takes place within higher education as those interested in our shared public life struggle to make democracy work as it should. *HEX* has sought to be a journal where readers and the general public, as well as those in academe, find thoughtful and useful articles written by fellow thinkers. It has sought to open a discourse that provides a sensible, clear civic vocabulary for the role of higher education in our democracy. It has sought to be a space to nudge reflection, to confront perspectives outside the norm, and to help people connect. We hope you have found it so.
THE PUBLIC/ACADEMIC DISCONNECT

David W. Brown

Reprinted from the 1995 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

The much talked about crisis in higher education is, superficially, one of dollars—more competition for research funds, downsizing of both academic and staff functions, trying to cope with the financial-aid needs of students and the deferred maintenance costs of the physical plant—in a political climate that offers no prospect of a bailout with larger public subsidies or dramatic tuition increases.

No doubt the crisis is financial, but it arises, in substantial part, from legislators and taxpayers having second thoughts about the kind of returns they are getting on their investment. Many institutions of higher learning are being forced to reexamine their relations to a public that can no longer be counted on to support them as they have in the past.

For most Americans, higher education has always been a very pragmatic investment—used both for personal advancement and for civic purposes. Personal advancement still rides high in the saddle. Short of rhetorical flourish, serious civic purpose has not been seen for some time. Each of our more than 3,000 colleges and universities is left to articulate and pursue whatever mission fits its circumstance, and what they do now is serve as necessary vehicles for faculty and student ambitions. Most colleges and universities, however, have no coherent agenda of their own that serves larger public interests. Ernest Boyer, executive director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, says, “The campus is seen as a place for faculty to get tenured and students to get credentialed, but what goes on there is not seen as relevant to many of our social problems” (Boyer 1990).

Where once we educated a small class of relatively privileged young men to serve and govern their communities, now we educate a much larger and heterogeneous cohort, with hardly a thought given to their preparation for such civic work. Civic purpose is, at best, a university’s mission to educate for professional employment by which its graduates distinguish and distance themselves from a lay public, and then serve that public according to certified knowledge, skills, and self-regulated codes of ethics.
The chasm is especially wide between academics and citizens—too wide for anyone to leap without risking serious injury. Perhaps no other professional world is more removed now from democratic culture than the hierarchies within and among academic departments, in which opinion—anyone’s—is valued only to the extent that it has first been certified by an elaborate credentialing process. If citizens are heard, they certainly are not listened to. Thomas Bender concludes that “academic truth” and “political knowledge” are now worlds apart, and make it difficult for “academic intellect” to be involved in “democratic culture” (Bender 1990).

Even those professors who see “politics” and “power” in every text and institution nonetheless pursue their critiques in very orthodox academic fashion. They deconstruct, but they do not communicate with the larger public. They labor for the approval of their peers, but not for the sake of that public. There are clearly rewards for their academic performance, but very little of it benefits the real-world constituencies that inspire their scholarship. The marginality that Boyer speaks of and the chasm described by Bender underlie the supposed crisis that presidents, deans, department chairs, and faculty now must deal with, whether they acknowledge it or not. It is not just their budgets that are precarious, but also their public standing.

On the assumption that a good teacher uses any problem that arises in the classroom as an opportunity to learn, perhaps the crisis in higher education is an opportunity for universities to learn how they can better serve those who have become hostile or indifferent to their interests. Or as Boyer asks, “Is it possible for the work of the academy to relate more effectively to our most pressing social, economic, and civic problems?” Another observer calls it “a fluid moment” and believes that the “downsizing” of many universities may make it possible to get some attention paid to strategies that reconnect universities to the broader jurisdictions in which they are located or which underwrite a large portion of their costs. For Thomas Bender, “The agenda for the next decade . . . ought to be the opening up of the disciplines, the ventilating of professional communities . . . that have become too self-referential” (Bender 1993, 143).

A good way to begin is by encouraging academics to do work that has practical consequence for public problem solving and to do such work with citizens, not for them. Universities alone or in a regional consortium might
establish “civic training centers” to educate graduate students and to reeducate faculty members as to the arts of collaboration with the numerous publics whose participation is essential if pressing social problems are to be solved.

Most problem solving in most organizations and communities is a shared enterprise that some people think of as “politics.” If I found myself alone on a desert island, there would be no politics. To be political is to be engaged in a process of analysis and interaction with other people. Independent grounds for judgment surely exist, such as the norms of a methodology or an ideology, but there is rarely any feasible way to enforce them in the political life of organizations and communities. In such venues, academics and those who study with them are called upon to help make decisions rather than discover answers. Whatever their technical skills or ideology, they must be prepared to adjust to public circumstances over which they have little or no control.

To be political is to be engaged in a process of analysis and interaction with other people.

A civic training center would be the place to develop “interrogating practices” that help citizens break down and break through the proprietary languages of academics so that their specialized vocabularies can be made intelligible, reflected on, and used without license by nonspecialists. Fifteen years ago, Charles Lindblom and David Cohen, in a remarkably candid report, criticized the failure of professional researchers to concede that despite their “specialized investigative techniques, especially quantitative,” most of them “inevitably rely heavily on the same ordinary techniques of speculation, definition, conceptualization, hypothesis, formulation, and verification,” that are practiced by ordinary citizens. A civic training center would also be the place to promote the equally important practice, so often neglected by academics, of learning to ask “What is it that members of the public know that I need to know, if I am to be of any help?” (Lindblom and Cohen 1979, 15).

Two existing university centers are working examples of how new civic training centers might be organized. The Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, and more particularly its Project Public Life, develops and teaches ways “to reengage citizens in the public world.” The project’s work includes action research, teaching methods, organizing and outreach, which combine theory, language, and skills that help citizens to be participants in the everyday politics of problem solving. One significant initiative under way is the project’s recent work with service,
health, and professional organizations and their staff development programs. Harry Boyte, a codirector of the project, believes that “professional identities,” without reform and civic enrichment, are not only unequal to public problems, but present serious obstacles to their resolution.

The Center for Community Partnership at the University of Pennsylvania is an important partner working with the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps, a decade’s effort to create and sustain comprehensive community schools. The university does not contribute financial support, but instead, through the center, offers the talent of its students and faculty members to work with children, parents, and others in West Philadelphia. The goal is to create viable “community schools” as social hubs for the entire community. Since those at Penn do not assume that they know how to do that for the residents of West Philadelphia, their center pursues a “Deweyan” strategy that emphasizes “a mutually beneficial, democratic relationship between academics and nonacademics.” The center is as much learning-oriented as it is service-oriented. Participation is not one-way, but two-way partnerships of faculty members, students, staff, and alumni, with residents—all learning from each other as they share problems and produce better outcomes than would otherwise happen if any one of them tried to do it alone.

Professional reputation is, and will remain, the reference point for those in the academy. That is why they must find a professional reason for being more attentive to civic culture. There is nothing like the experience of academics in real world problem solving to remind them that they still have much to learn or learn anew. It is possible that civic training centers would help to facilitate such learning and, thereby, influence the nature of reforms in graduate education and the research agenda of young scholars.

Whatever civic training centers might do to reconnect faculties and graduate students to the larger public world and its problems, the learning that took place could also be plowed back into teaching and problem solving on campus.

Not only do many academic professionals refuse or fail to connect with real world constituencies, they also set a terrible example in their academic hierarchies on campus and the expert-novice distance maintained in lecture halls and classrooms. That is not how people come together in the real world to solve problems. Although “civic education” is not acknowledged on most campuses, it is, nonetheless, implicit in campus rituals and routines that are conspicuously undemocratic. To experience public life and the politics that govern its outcomes means learning to reject the notion that the answers are “out there” in the custody of professionals. Neither are the answers “in
here”—the radical subjectivity promoted by well-meaning teachers and facilitators. Civic training centers might help teaching faculty to offer students learning structures in the classroom that resemble the complex organizations and diverse communities which await them. Treating students as consumers of higher education makes each of them feel important, but also makes them ill equipped for influencing events or solving collective problems.

In normal times, the problems of a campus are usually addressed from the top down. Students are transient; some faculty find it hard to collaborate with others as equals; and professional staff is expected to administer the place for those who think that they have better things to do. But one campus observer thinks that it is very important to piece together whatever civic culture exists at any university, going through the difficult transition of downsizing, or experiencing other problems that disturb and divide the various constituencies on campus. Such constituencies now find it hard to talk about their differences constructively, finding some group, other than their own, to blame. A civic training center might explore ways in which students, administrators, and faculty members can initiate and sustain a way of talking about the public life and problems that they share. Finding and practicing a democratic language—neither professionalized nor shrill—might help them get on with problem solving together.

Moreover, a public needs problems to work on, not just to talk about. Diversity on any campus enlarges the circle but, as another observer notes, each member of the circle needs a public role rather than merely having his or her “identity” acknowledged. If those in a circle are really to learn how to live with their differences, they need something to do together. Perhaps civic training centers could be places that help campuses move from the rhetoric of multiculturalism to real civic work.

REFERENCES
Civic Learning for the Working World

Harry C. Boyte

Reprinted from the 2013 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

Traditions of Citizenship as Public Work

A challenge to conceptions that contrast citizenship with work, common among leaders of the American Revolution who had little use for work (and condescended toward working people), developed through the colonial experiences and early years of the nation. The actual labors of settlers, who had cleared lands, built towns and villages, wells, meeting halls, and roads, generated what the historian Robert Wiebe has called America’s portable democracy (Wiebe 1995) and cultivated a democratic assertiveness among the people. “Experience proves that the very men whom you entrust with the support and defense of your most sacred liberties are frequently corrupt,” wrote a group of artisans in Philadelphia during the Revolution. “If ever therefore your rights are preserved, it must be through the virtue and integrity of the middling sort, as farmers, tradesmen, & etc.” (Kazin 1995, 9). Benjamin Franklin spoke and wrote in this vein. The Leather Apron Club, which he founded in Philadelphia in 1727, included tradesmen, artisans, and shopkeepers—those whom he lauded as “the middling people”—and combined hard work and civic commitments. The Club discussed civic and political topics of the day, developed plans for self-improvement, and created a network of citizens committed to “doing well by doing good.” Members generated myriad civic projects, including a street-sweeping corps, volunteer firefighters, tax-supported neighborhood constables, health and life insurance groups, a library, a hospital, an academy for educating young people, a society for sharing scientific discoveries, and a postal system (Isaacson 2012). In a similar vein, Franklin proposed education that combined practical and liberal arts, a union that was to reappear in the country’s land grant colleges.

The connection between work and citizenship further developed in the early years of the new nation. “When [ideals of disinterested civic virtue] proved too idealistic and visionary,” writes Gordon Wood, Americans “found new democratic adhesives in the actual behavior of plain, ordinary people” (Wood
1991, ix). Several interrelated, interacting traditions of citizenship as public work emerged, worth identifying as foundations for citizen-centered democracy:

- **Community building**—the collective labors (paid and unpaid) of solving public problems and building and sustaining shared resources in communities;
- **Vocation and civic professionalism**—callings to careers filled with public purpose; and
- **Democratizing public work**—work that deepens and expands democracy.

**Community Building**

David Mathews has described pithily the tradition of practical community building in his treatment of the emergence of institutions such as public schools. “Nineteenth-century self-rule . . . was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics;” Mathews writes:

The democracy of self-rule was rooted in collective decision making and acting—especially acting. Settlers on the frontier had to be producers, not just consumers. They had to join forces to build forts, roads, and libraries. They formed associations to combat alcoholism and care for the poor as well as to elect representatives. They also established the first public schools. Their efforts were examples of “public work,” meaning work done by not just for the public (Mathews 2006, vii).

Such public work drew on traditions of “the commons”—lands, streams, and forests for which whole communities had responsibility and in which they had rights of use, and also goods of general benefit built mainly through citizen labors, like schools, libraries, community centers, wells, roads, music festivals, and arts fairs. All were associated with the term “the commonwealth.” Indeed, for many immigrants, America represented a chance to recreate the commons privatized by elites in Europe. As the historians Oscar and Mary Handlin observed about the Revolutionary generation of the 1770s, “For the farmers and seamen, for the fishermen, artisans and new merchants, commonwealth repeated the lessons they knew from the organization of churches and towns . . . the value of
common action” (Handlin 1969, 30). Such community-building traditions of communal labor can be found around the world. They create rich foundations for a normative ideal of citizenship as collective, self-directed labors, citizenship that is practical and hands-on, and which bridges divisions of status, income, and other differences for the sake of community-benefit (Boyte 2011).

Vocation and Civic Professionalism

Collaborative work that solves public problems and creates common resources for communities is one current of public work citizenship. Work filled with public purpose is another. This concept draws on the rich theological idea of *vocation*. As John Budd observes, “When Martin Luther translated biblical verses such as ‘Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called’ from the original Greek into German . . . he used the German word for ‘occupation’ for ‘calling.’ Thus, Luther initiated a radically new perspective in which all are called to employ their gifts, ‘something that fits how we are made, so that doing it will enable us to glorify God, serve others, and be most richly ourselves’” (Budd 2011, 167).

The connection between vocation and education has recently resurfaced in undergraduate education. Liberal arts colleges like Augsburg College, the new institutional home of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, illustrate the recall of vocation and have the potential for significant impact since they are “upstream” centers, shaping the identities and practices of thousands of civic leaders. In its educational vision, *Vocation, Access, and Excellence*, Augsburg highlights the concept of vocation, integrated into its core curriculum as “a fertile seedbed for the democratic ethos.”

This view of vocation both stresses the importance of education and clarifies its role. One does not seek education for either self-advancement or as a way to reach salvation. Its proper role is in helping persons determine and develop their abilities in preparation for investigating and celebrating God’s creation, for probing the mysteries of the human condition, and ultimately for furthering the well-being of society. As Luther said, God doesn’t want a cobbler who puts crosses on shoes; God wants a cobbler who makes good, reliable footwear (*Vocation, Access, and Excellence* 2012).

Augsburg’s view of vocation has potential for helping to bridge the sharp divide in higher education between professional studies on the one hand, and liberal arts and civic learning on the other.

A sense of calling or vocation is associated with the rise of professions.
Though professions are often understood in terms of the emergence of a disinterested ethic tied to positivist theories of knowledge and detached from politics and self-interests, an alternative tradition of “citizen professionalism” contributes especially to American democracy. William Sullivan identifies a central tension in professionalism in the United States since the colonial period, “between a technical emphasis which stresses specialization—broadly linked to a utilitarian conception of society as a project for enhancing efficiency and individual satisfaction—and a sense of professional mission which has insisted upon the prominence of the ethical and civic dimension of the enterprise” (Sullivan 1995, 28).

Scott Peters has detailed extensive practices of such civic professionalism in the land grant college tradition, especially before World War II. Land grants combined “practical arts” with “liberal arts,” and sought to develop professionals with a strong sense of their civic responsibilities. “Our colleges should not be content with only the training of outstanding agriculturalists, or engineers, or home economists, or teachers, or scientists, or lawyers, or doctors, or veterinarians,” declared John Hannah, president of Michigan State College in 1944. “The first and never-forgotten objective must be that every human product of our educational system must be given the training that will enable him to be an effective citizen, appreciating his opportunities and fully willing to assume his responsibilities in a great democracy” (Peters 2004, 47).

William Doherty and his colleagues at the Citizen Professional Center have pioneered in the practices and theory of such citizen professionalism. Adapting broad-based organizing practices and public work concepts to family and health professions, their citizen professional model begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge, and “the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives.” The Citizen Professional Center has generated multiple partnerships including suburban movements of families working to untangle overscheduled, consumerist lives; an
African American Citizen Fathers Project seeking to foster positive fathering models and practices; a new project with Hennepin County to change civil service practices into public work; and a pilot with Health Partners Como Clinic, called the Citizen Health Care Home, which stresses personal and family responsibility for one’s own health and opportunities for patient leadership development and co-responsibility for health (Doherty et al. 2010).

**Democratizing Public Work**

The work of making democratic change is a third tradition of citizenship, overlapping and intertwining with community-building work and civic professionalism. Union and community organizers, civil rights workers, suffragists, and others created a strong tradition of work for democratic social change, mingling with the very idea of “work” itself as a wellspring for change. Thus the iconic bookends of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s career were the unforgettable images of thousands of domestic workers walking to their jobs in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 to protest segregated buses, and the signs of Memphis garbage workers declaring “I Am A Man,” demanding recognition and dignity in 1968.

Change making through professional work played a pivotal role in the African American freedom struggle. Gerald Taylor has argued that after the collapse of the Populist Party in the 1890s, the black community turned to “knowledge artisans”:

> While millions of property owners and artisans sinking into debt peonage, or forced into wage labor, formed the populist movement, the rising professions, what could be called collectives of “knowledge artisans,” offers a contrasting story of the search for independence among both whites and blacks, using a different set of strategies in an effort to consolidate control over productive property, work products, tools, and vocational training and accreditation. . . . These intellectual artisans, accountants, doctors, lawyers, engineers among others, gained control over what we now call the professions. The professionalization of these groups provided the ability to negotiate contracts but retain control over their workplaces, their tools and their schedules. They controlled decisions about the learning and application of their knowledge of these intellectual crafts, the formation centers that prepared them and the terms by which they could enter the professions. . . . By the early 20th century, these professional guilds had organized national organizations, stabilized and expanded the income of their members and wielded significant economic, political and cultural influence” (Taylor 2012, 224-225).

In the African American community, knowledge artisans provided leadership in the continuing freedom struggle by building centers of
independent power ranging from schools and congregations to businesses and beauty parlors.

Parallels can also be seen among European Americans in the 1920s and 1930s who created foundations for civic change. These included many who viewed schools and other educational sites, such as settlement houses, as being at the center of democracy.

**Civic Learning Through Public Work**

Our civic engagement work through the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) began in 1987 with an argument that communal labor traditions nourished a “commonwealth” politics throughout American history. Working with partners, we sought to translate methods and ideas of broad-based community organizing, themes of “the commonwealth,” and principles of self-organized governance, as articulated by Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues, into other settings, with a particular focus on education in schools, communities, and higher education.

As we sought to democratize educational institutions it soon became apparent that institutional organizing requires a shift in framework. Rather than seeing institutions in conventional ways—as fixed and static, defined by structures, procedures, rules and regulations—we have to reconceive them as living and dynamic communities, with norms, values, leadership, and cultural identities. Maria Avila, a former Mexican American organizer with the IAF who directed the Center for Community Based Learning at Occidental College, has given a vivid account of what this means. “The medicine for our predicament [in higher education] requires efforts to restructure the way we think, act, behave toward each other, and the way we act as a collective to restructure power and resources.” Avila argues that organizing focuses on cultural change before structural change. “Culture changes [come] first, leading to structural changes later.” Change is relational, tied to organizing and power. “For academic institutions to partner with community groups, institutions and organizations for a better society [requires] countless opportunities for conversations and organizing campaigns with community partners engaged in power restructuring” (Avila 2003).

Work is at the heart of the self-interest in all institutions, including schools and colleges. Democratizing the politics of knowledge and making such politics explicit has to be an essential strategy. Seeing institutions as communities, building public relationships, undertaking intentional changes in their cultures to make them more public, and thinking in political terms about
knowledge, as well as other power sources, highlights the dynamics of work routines, incentives, norms, and identities. A public work approach to organizing differs, in significant respects, from conventional liberal and communitarian approaches to civic engagement, both of which have strong normative frameworks. Public work avoids exhortations about what teachers, students, staff, or institutions should do. Rather, public work connects individual and institutional interests to citizenship and the public good by inviting people to “make work more public,” more interactive, collaborative, visible, and filled with public purposes. We saw this early on, for instance, in the efforts of a group called The Collaboration for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning that sought to spread active learning practices in education. Lesley Cafarelli, director of the consortium, explains:

In 1991 . . . [the consortium] began an intensive effort to raise the frequency and level of campus conversations about teaching. This effort, funded by The Bush Foundation, was a response to our observation that the culture of privacy around higher education’s most public activity—teaching—serves to obstruct both individual and collective efforts to strengthen student learning. How can faculty strive to improve their teaching, for example, if there are few opportunities to observe and learn from other professionals or to wrestle intellectually with colleagues about ways to cope with both common and surprising difficulties in teaching? How can colleges and universities fulfill their public responsibility if there is little or no collective knowledge of how teaching is practiced, sharing of expertise, or joint exploration of teachers’ impact on student learning? An academic culture that preserves the privacy—even secrecy—of the classroom fosters professional isolation and stifles improvement (Cafarelli 1998).

Nan Kari and a group of faculty, staff, and students at the College of St. Catherine, working with the CDC, addressed the challenge of “making teaching and learning more public” through adapting community organizing methods. Their work significantly informed the CDC’s general theory of citizenship as public work. Building on such partnerships, public work created the framework of the 1999 Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Research Universities, which I coauthored with Elizabeth Hollander on behalf of a group of higher education leaders.

The concept of public work also informed an initiative in schools, begun during those years and known as Public Achievement. It sought to revitalize the empowering civic learning of the Citizenship Education Program of the civil rights movement. Teams of young people—typically ranging from elementary through high school students, but more recently also involving college students and sometimes older adults—work through the school year on public issues of their choice. Members of the team are coached by adults
who help them develop achievable goals and learn political skills and concepts. At St. Bernard’s elementary school in St. Paul, Public Achievement became the centerpiece of the culture in the early and mid-1990s through the leadership of then-principal Dennis Donovan, who insisted that all forms of work in the school, including teaching, have public and empowering dimensions. Public Achievement at St. Bernard’s was closely linked to the concept of “citizen teacher,” an idea that seems especially important in an era when high stakes testing and technocratic measures of accountability threaten the foundations of teacher autonomy and creativity. Since its founding in 1990, Public Achievement has spread to several hundred communities and schools in the United States, as well schools in Poland, Northern Ireland, Gaza and the West Bank, Israel, and elsewhere.

Skills and habits of civic politics include relationship building, tolerance for ambiguity, ability to deal with conflict constructively, and the capacity to act in open environments with no predetermined outcomes. These are not part of normal higher education curricula, or of scientific or other conventional academic or professional disciplines. The capacities for civic politics and civic professionalism have to be learned mainly in practice, and also entail unlearning such tendencies as hypercompetitive individualism, intellectual certitude, and the stance of outside observer, which are frequently byproducts of conventional graduate education. Our colleague Bill Doherty estimates that it usually takes two years of learning and unlearning for most professionals to do effective public work.

There are also other, parallel and sometimes allied, efforts in education to make work more public. These include the deliberative pedagogies in K-12 schools and higher education supported by Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute. In higher education, such deliberative pedagogies now have a demonstrated track record for generating agency and action in settings like Wake Forest University. In K-12 education, research by Stacie Molnar-Main is showing that teachers who use deliberative pedagogies report an enhancement of their own sense of citizenship as teachers, as well as notably more active, engaged citizenship among their students.¹

Such efforts to make education more public found some support from populist elements within the Obama administration. At the White House on January 10, 2012, the Office of Public Engagement and the Department of Education hosted a national gathering of civic and educational leaders called

¹ For evidence in higher education, see John Dedrick with Laura Grattan and Harris Dienstfrey, Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education and Stacie Molnar-Main, Public Learning in Public Schools.
“For Democracy’s Future: Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission.” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the addition of a “third C,” citizenship, to the department’s commitments to preparation for college and career. At the White House event, education groups undertook new initiatives to strengthen civic learning and education. The Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report, *A Crucible Moment*, calling for civic learning to become “pervasive” in colleges and universities. And the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP) of educational groups and institutions was launched, created on invitation by Jon Carson, director of the White House Office of Public Engagement. ACP aimed at marking the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which established the first land-grant colleges, by developing new strategies to strengthen the civic identities of colleges and universities as part of the larger movement for a citizen-centered democracy.

ACP grew out of the Civic Agency Initiative, part of a coalition of state colleges and universities called the American Democracy Project, which spread and adapted empowering pedagogies from Public Achievement. A group of colleges and universities began to work together on these themes, including Lone Star Community College, Western Kentucky University, Georgia State College and University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, Winona State University, Augsburg College, Syracuse University, and more recently the University of Washington Bothell. In several places—especially Northern Arizona University and the University of Maryland Baltimore County—concepts of civic agency and public work became the foundation for large-scale institutional innovation in curriculum and co-curricular life.

ACP also created a context for highlighting outstanding examples of education as public work. For instance, at the White House meeting we spotlighted the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, a public school on a 78-acre farm in the southwestern corner of the city, where students learn math, science, English, and writing through the processes of planting, harvesting, marketing, and selling vegetables. Juniors and seniors enroll in classes that focus on the city’s flower garden show, learning horticulture, animal science, agricultural mechanics, economics, food science, communications, and business. Guided by teachers, the students also have a good deal of space for self-organizing and initiating their projects. “Connecting work and academics makes a huge difference in terms of ways students look at education,” says Lucille Shaw, assistant principal. “Through all of their academic classes as well as technical studies students can blend and apply concepts.” Students also learn “we’re all in this together,” Shaw says. “What is this going to do to better my life, and help someone else?” With a high number of
students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often struggle with standardized testing, the Ag School has won national attention for its success in college preparation and student achievement—87 percent graduate and go to college. Fifty-nine percent meet or exceed average scores on the Prairie State Achievement exams, which test for reading, English, math, science, and writing, compared to 28 percent in the Chicago district as a whole.\(^2\)

ACP deepened the theory of public work, including the framework of “civic science,” an effort to rethink the nature of science, its role and relationship to society, and the identity of scientists through the lens of civic agency and public work. For some years, the CDC had worked on civic science with the Delta Center, a world-renown center for infant development science. ACP created a context to deepen the idea and develop relationships on civic science with leaders in climate science, sustainable agriculture, science and technology studies, and other fields. Civic science highlights the political—though not partisan—nature of science; science as a powerful source of knowledge for action in the world, rather than an outside description of the world. In this sense, science itself is a resource for helping to negotiate a shared democratic way of life. Civic science stresses that scientists are also citizens, who come together with nonscientists to solve real-world problems in the course of building a democratic society. Civic science addresses what may be called “the knowledge war” that feeds a bitterly divided, hyperpolarized society.\(^3\) The Delta Center launched a new initiative based on civic science, Get Ready Iowa, to bridge the professional educator and policymaker/parent divides, and ACP created an organizing team for a new international civic science initiative.\(^4\)

\(^2\) The account of the Chicago Ag school and its successes is taken from Harry C. Boyte, “For Democracy’s Future,” Huffington Post, November 9, 2012; for parallel evidence that consequential work tied to education is a powerful motivator for low income student success, see Peter Levine, et al, CIRCLE, Pathways Into Leadership.


Overall, the American Commonwealth Partnership generated the realization of the need for a reform movement across all of education to put public work—work with explicit civic dimensions—back into the center. This means bridging the gap between liberal education and civic learning, career and workforce preparation, and between thinking and acting in terms of the economies and civic ecologies of local communities. We need a broad reform effort to “integrate the three C’s” of college, career, and citizenship, for the health of our communities and our democracy, for the viability of our educational institutions, and for our careers as professionals.

Agents of Change, Not Objects of Change

As the political theorist and community organizer Rom Coles has observed, it is hard for many to believe that such democratic innovations add up to much more than “oases of democracy” in an expanding desert of a technocratic and market-driven culture (Coles 2006, 547-561). What makes it possible to imagine that wider change is possible?

Feeding the discouragement of many, a 2013 story from Inside Higher Education dramatizes the possibility that higher education will become reengineered in narrow ways that eviscerate the liberal dimensions of learning entirely. “North Carolina governor joins chorus of Republicans critical of liberal arts,” read the headline in Inside Higher Education. “Governor McCrory’s comments on higher education echo statements made by a number of Republican governors—including those in Texas, Florida, and Wisconsin—who have questioned the value of liberal arts instruction and humanities degrees at public colleges and universities. Those criticisms have started to coalesce into a potential Republican agenda on higher education, emphasizing reduced state funding, low tuition prices, vocational training, performance funding for faculty members, state funding tied to job placement in 'high demand' fields and taking on flagship institutions” (Inside Higher Education 2013).

But such developments also create openings. The first populist movement among small farmers, black and white, grew from the threats to farmers’ civic autonomy. As Gerald Taylor observes, professionals of all kinds experience analogous threats to their autonomy as knowledge artisans, in environments where “outcome measures” become increasingly narrow, from standardized tests in K-12 to HMO efficiency measures. Like farmers “who contested the loss of control over the means of their work and the intellectual and physical products of that work,” (Taylor 2012, 226) faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders are faced with the prospect that they will either be the architects
of change or they will be its objects. There is a need to move from protest and resistance to the constructive identities of architects of change, rebuilding public relationships and alliances with many others in American life.

This challenge requires an empowering civic education and many sites that are citizenship schools for knowledge societies. It calls for a revitalization of education itself as a great and animating civic vocation. Public work for citizen-centered democracy will be central to the process.

REFERENCES


COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND CIVIC LEARNING
An Interview with Bernie Ronan

In 2011, David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Bernie Ronan, who directs the Division of Public Affairs of Maricopa Community College, which includes the Center for Civic Participation. Brown was interested in learning more about Ronan’s views as expressed in his study The Civic Spectrum: How Students Become Engaged Citizens, and his work with a new national undertaking of community colleges—The Democracy Commitment—which he helped to launch.

Brown: In Derek Barker’s preface to your study for the Kettering Foundation, The Civic Spectrum: How Students Become Engaged Citizens, Barker characterized it as “a theory of change for civic learning.” Could you say more about how such a theory enables community colleges to play a more significant role in helping students become engaged citizens?

Ronan: The theory underlying the current paradigm of civic education would seem to be based on content, on a body of knowledge that students are supposed to have, which arguably enables them to engage as informed citizens. The Civic Spectrum argues for a different theory underlying civic education—a developmental frame in which “civics” implies skills or habits (what the ancients called virtues), and that these are built up over time and acquired through experience. To the extent that this is a change from the current paradigm of civic education, it also represents a theory of change for civic learning.

Brown: I find your three dimensions of civic learning—“head,” “heart,” and “hands,”—to be useful prompts for what educators should include. With a bit of explanation about each, could you tell me what more needs to be done by community colleges to incorporate each of them?

Ronan: In my view, learning to be a citizen takes time; it unfolds over the course of a student’s academic career and continues to develop through a lifetime of citizenship. Therefore, schools and colleges have a responsibility to actively structure and encourage a range of civic experiences for students that unfold over the course of their time in these institutions. Colleges must “walk the talk of citizenship” so that students see reflected in their educational experiences the values of democratic life that the institution stands for. They do this through the creation and nurturing of the polis, the “space of appearance” that citizens create to speak and act together.
In terms of what is at stake in this civic education, I argue that it has three dimensions. Intellectual formation hinges on the growth of practical wisdom, which I term as “savvy.” While the intellectual content of civics courses remains important, educational institutions must focus far more of their attention on how savvy is built up, how students have the experiences they need to learn how to do things in the world. The linchpin of this practical wisdom is deliberation—the learned ability to balance trade-offs and explore underlying values that has long characterized the best of democratic life in our modern systems.

The second dimension of civic education concerns the affective or emotional, which I frame as “friendship,” following the ancient theme of Aristotle that “friendship holds cities together.” As Robert Sokolowski puts it, friendship implies mutual benefit, mutually recognized. Arguably, this dimension of civic education—the bonds that form among those who pursue some civic purpose together, and how they discover through their civic work that their own good is actually the good of others—is the least explored in our schools and colleges.

The savvy acquired through deliberation and the bond that forms through civic friendship get instantiated in public action, the third dimension of the civic spectrum. I posit that this dimension issues forth in the world through the flourishing of freedom, not freedom of movement or free will, but the power that comes about when citizens act together. “Freedom” is the power to act together, and it is the essence of politics, of civics. So savvy, friendship, and freedom are what are at stake in civic education. Our colleges need a more robust sense of civic learning, and that would then drive enhancements of curricula and the creation of new opportunities for developing the intellectual, affective, and political skills to be acquired by students.

Brown: Are community college students learning the art of deliberation in their classrooms?

Ronan: The short answer is no. Not surprisingly, the pedagogy of the community college classroom is often not that different from the university. This is especially unfortunate since our classrooms are typically much smaller, certainly smaller than the university lecture hall. There is clearly more chance for deliberation in a classroom of 30 than there is in a lecture hall of 300. The paradigm in our colleges is still principally that the professor is the expert who lectures, and the student takes in the content. I am hoping to help educators see that this skill of deliberation (as key to the growth of savvy in students) must be fostered, and that opportunities for students to deliberate about issues must be built into the fabric of college instruction.
Obviously, many faculty are already doing this. But I seek to help faculty see that deliberation in the classroom, as well as the opportunity for deliberation in the many informal settings in which students find themselves in college life, are a pivotal means of building practical wisdom.

**Brown:** Is deliberation being used when it comes to service learning?

**Ronan:** Rarely. In my opinion, deliberation offers a vastly enhanced means of reflection on service, but the reflection needs to occur in a policy, or civic, context. This is why some are critical of service learning as it is currently practiced in colleges. The reflection may turn the student inward to reflect on what they have learned, to assess how they feel as a result of their service. But it is critically important that it also engage the student in reflecting on the policy issues at stake in the service. It is not enough to just work in a soup kitchen. It is also imperative that a student reflect on why there are soup kitchens, why there is homelessness and poverty, and what role beyond service (such as research, advocacy, or political action) a student should undertake to address the policy issues associated with working in a soup kitchen. To the extent that service is a refuge from politics, to the extent that students seek service instead of engaging in the hurly-burly of political action, then such apolitical reflection does a disservice to the cause of civic education. If students, for example, were engaged in deliberating with each other about the policy implications of their service, they would acquire the civic skill of deliberation, which Aristotle found so key to the building up of practical wisdom—again, what I have termed “savvy.” Students would also discover dimensions of their common service that would likely not occur to them if they were just writing in their journal or doing their individual reflection. This obviously reveals a bias of mine, namely that service done by an individual, without engaging others, is a relatively low-level civic activity.

**Brown:** In a question related to deliberation, what is being done in community college classrooms or elsewhere on campus to “walk the talk” about students learning to act democratically?

**Ronan:** I love a term coined by the American Association of State
Colleges and Universities in their American Democracy Project: institutional intentionality. Colleges must be intentionally democratic; it is not something that happens by chance. This intentionality must be evidenced in how student government runs, in the way clubs operate on a campus, in how students are treated by their faculty, in how faculty engage with each other as colleagues, in how administration runs the school, and so forth. It is what we hope to instill through The Democracy Commitment: not just better civic experiences for students, but also an enhanced sense of the college as a civic agent that embodies in its practices the values and principles we as democratic citizens profess.

Much of the traction that we have gained through The Democracy Commitment has been by leveraging a “push back” against the vocational focus of so much of the current national discussion about the role of community colleges. Faculty in our colleges see themselves as being about more than skill training for the workplace. Having said that, it is also imperative that we as educators see that the civic skills we seek to educe from our students have significant similarities and overlap with the kinds of skills which employers need in the 21st century worker.

**Brown:** How will community colleges, in practical terms, distinguish between “service learning” and “civic learning”?

**Ronan:** This is crucial. Certainly the paradigmatic civic experience currently extant in our colleges is service learning. So there is a natural tendency when we talk about The Democracy Commitment to look first, and finally, at what a college is doing in service learning. However, there are two challenges which we hope to pose to this paradigm through The Democracy Commitment. First, what other civic practices can (and do!) colleges encourage and practice besides service learning? Our goal is to have an eminently “catholic” (small c) initiative, with a broad range of civic experiences and opportunities offered for students, so that colleges can pick and choose what practices they wish to undertake without valuing any given practice as better or worse than any other. Secondly, many service-learning practitioners lament the fact that their students’ service is all too frequently apolitical, that it stops short of policy implications and does not lead to further engagement in political work. So, we are hoping to move students through our initiative along what George Mehaffy from AASCU posits as a continuum from service to political engagement and advocacy resulting from their service. How can we make our service more civic, as it were.

**Brown:** Could you give me some examples of what is being done, or could be done, by those community colleges that are part of The Democracy Commitment?
Ronan: At a recent gathering of colleges involved in The Democracy Commitment, hosted by the Kettering Foundation, there was a rich spectrum of civic activity represented:

- Miami Dade College has offered almost a million hours of service learning to its community, and is now hoping to enhance this activity with “civic learning modules” for faculty who are offering service learning in their courses, as well as for other faculty interested in civic applications for their courses.

- Maricopa Community Colleges provide a variety of deliberative opportunities to engage their community, and offer a Student Public Policy Forum to train students in advocacy.

- Wayne County Community College District is actively involved in seeking to remediate the resegregation of schools in Detroit through civic engagement.

- Minneapolis Community and Technical College is partnering with Native American nonprofits in their city through community organizing, driven by credit courses the college offers on organizing and community development.

- Cuyahoga Community College offers students the opportunity to be trained in and facilitate Sustained Dialogue with other students, over an extended period, on issues of diversity and student success. This is part of a more comprehensive program of conflict mediation and peace studies that has national and international reach.

- Skyline College trains students in how to dialogue with others, and has held forums that utilize both dialogue and deliberation as techniques to address issues of concern to students on the campus.

- Macomb Community College trains students in how to utilize media for engagement and advocacy on issues of concern to them.

- Green River Community College addresses human rights issues in humanities courses to teach empathy.

- Gulf Coast College engages community and business leaders through forums to address regional issues and needs.

- Lone Star College-Kingwood engages college students in organizing with high school counterparts through Public Achievement to engage in civic activities designed by the students themselves.
• DeAnza College undertakes a wide range of campus and community organizing activities, ranging from political advocacy to diversity projects.

This snapshot represents the variety of civic work underway at community colleges, and likewise speaks to the need for a “big tent” approach to civic work in our colleges; one which does not prescribe any activities, but rather encourages a broad spectrum of civic work that colleges and their faculty can opt for based on their own interests and capacities.

**Brown:** Please go on.

**Ronan:** Community colleges are “tweeners”—they stand “between” K12 and the university in our P-20 education system. They have a stake in both sectors, since students come to them from high school, and many then transfer to complete bachelor’s degrees at the university. This argues for greater congruence between curricula in the civic realm, and for greater collaboration among faculty in high school, community college, and university. Further, community colleges can be especially fertile terrain for the growth of citizenship if they leverage their rootedness in their communities and proliferate the experiences of service and engagement that should typify their activities as community colleges. Finally, in terms of undergraduate education, the lower division is typically when most students experience the humanities and get their grounding in general education. And this is critically important subject matter for the development of citizenship, as Martha Nussbaum argues so persuasively in her book *Not for Profit*. So, this means that community colleges are a fulcrum for citizenship development, as students pivot between high school and university, and as they cycle through the core educational experiences that have long been seen as essential to a liberal arts education. I love the phrase “civic arts” since it speaks to the artistry that is involved in developing citizens and to the overlay between what we have always known as liberal arts education and the growth of citizens.

**Brown:** You have also noted that civic skills and work skills are not that different. Does that mean that when a community college prepares students for the workplace, it is already providing a form of civic learning?

**Ronan:** Bluntly, yes! Civic skills and workplace skills are congruent with each other. Here, I don’t mean the technical skills—how to run a lathe, or program a silicon wafer. Rather, I see the congruence in what have come

*Community colleges can be especially fertile terrain for the growth of citizenship.*
to be called “soft skills”—the ability to problem-solve as a team, to work together with others from diverse backgrounds, to negotiate conflicts and solve problems, to come together around shared values. And this congruence creates exciting synergies between occupational training and civic education. However, it also suggests that whenever academic instruction is developing the savvy, empathy, and political skills needed to exercise citizenship, a faculty member is teaching a student critically important employability skills as well.

To my mind, a student can gain as much savvy and learn as much about civic friendship in an internship in a company as they can by working on a community-service project; it all depends on the quality of the experience and how truly “worldly” that experience is. If a student is engaged in a rote function, no matter the setting, civic skills are rarely produced.

Brown: Coming back to the classroom, you have argued that political science and education, in general, have become “sanitized of morality” with the consideration of values “marginalized in the classroom.” What is being done, or can be done, in community college classrooms to counter this trend?

Ronan: I think wherever our colleges actively engage students in grappling with the real issues of the day, whether those issues are local, community issues, or global issues, they are on the path toward a moral life; they are on the road to pursuing the “good.” This is not automatic by any means, and there are many obstacles that can dissuade a student from addressing the morality at stake in issues-based education. But, at least the possibility exists for a student to ask the big questions, the important questions: What is the right thing to do in this circumstance? How should we address this issue? What is at stake for my community in this issue? So, I don’t argue that this marginalization of morality can be corrected only in active service; it can also be countered through enlightened, engaged instruction that helps students grapple with the real trade-offs and consequences of addressing the issues that confront us as a society. Right and wrong is all around us, every day. And regrettably, it is so often actualized through evangelical harangues and adversarial politics, and so rarely through the rigorous and passionate exchange of ideas that political life until the modern age was characterized by.

Brown: Do those who teach at Maricopa provide the classroom support for such a shared, issue-based education?

Ronan: Increasingly, yes. Our younger faculty have a real sense of civic commitment, and are open to ways to employ issues-based education in their courses. Our adjunct faculty often do the majority of our teaching, and they come from our communities and our businesses, with expertise in local issues and a sense of commitment to the community and its problems.
Efforts to teach about sustainability, for example, which are proliferating across community college (and university) campuses, are an illustration of a natural, almost organic response on the part of faculty and students to a civic issue of literally global importance. The challenge is how to do it, how to incorporate civic themes in our instruction in a way that enhances the teaching and learning, but does not detract from the learning objectives of the course. This challenge needs to be embraced by the professional development programs at our colleges, which exist to help our faculty improve their courses with new techniques and emphases.

**Brown:** You have said that more has to be done to nurture the politics of everyday life. But just how does that nurturing come about?

**Ronan:** Thomas Jefferson would say that educators are the ones to nurture. He argued that it was the role of education to inform young people with the skills they needed for a life of democratic citizenship. So in that sense, new efforts, such as The Democracy Commitment, among community colleges are a more recent revisiting of the age-old destiny of American education: to educate for citizenship. I love the metaphor that David Mathews has been using lately of the political “wetlands”—those rich associational spaces that are densely political, but most often are informal and very distant from our state capitols or our more “official” political spaces. Politics is everywhere. In our community colleges, the work of nurturing civic skills must reach beyond the classroom to clubs, athletic fields, student governments, honors societies—the wetlands of higher education where students come together. As Mary Kirlin, associate professor in the department of Public Policy and Administration at California State University Sacramento, says, this nurturance must be ongoing and consequential; it must be about things that matter to students and the world, not activities contrived or artificial. Faith-based settings are also key to the building of citizenship, since students gravitate to these settings because their faith impels them, and this provides a ready rationale for civic education and the development of the virtues of citizenship. Cities, schools, nonprofits, libraries—all of these settings are fertile ground for developing civic skills. I am clearly speaking here for a revivification of the ancient purpose of politics, to engage citizens in the work of the public worlds in which they live and work.

**Brown:** You argue that citizenship and politics involve complex problems. Isn’t that one big reason why so many complex problems have been delegated to professional problem solvers in government and NGOs? Can citizens take back what they have delegated for almost a century now?

**Ronan:** With tongue in cheek, I am inclined to ask those who routinely
delegate our complex problems to professionals, in the words of TV’s Dr. Phil, “So, how is that working for you?” The complexity of the world’s problems outstrips the skills and expertise of professionals. We see this again and again in countless policy settings, and yet we continue to delegate these problems to the administrative elite. And how is that working? It is not that professional expertise has no role in the solution of today’s problems, but rather that the role of the public administrator today must be to engage citizens in cocreating the solutions to these problems, working side by side with citizens. Here the language of the National Issues Forums is helpful, which refers to these as “wicked” problems—problems which defy simple, elegant solutions, but which require political answers, hammered out through the give-and-take of deliberation and the iterative process through which citizens have always collaborated and compromised to address thorny issues that confront them.

This suggests that we need a new compact between public administrators and citizens, one that sees the work of citizens as the work of democracy. This is what the term “civic agency” implies that Harry Boyte has written about—that citizens are agents of democracy to the extent that they are empowered to take on the work of political action in their communities. And this in turn suggests a different, more partner-like role for public administrators, one which works side by side with citizens in doing public work.

**Brown:** You served as deputy director of the Arizona Department of Commerce and as deputy associate superintendent of the Arizona Department of Education. What did you learn from your government experience that informs your work now?

**Ronan:** My graduate education is in public administration. My time in state government taught me the value of public service, and this theme undergirds *The Civic Spectrum*. I would earnestly hope that these themes of civic work resonate with the public work of other administrators. Terry Cooper’s work has been instrumental in my formation, especially his seminal work, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration*. Cooper argues persuasively that public work is the work of citizens, and administrators are partners with citizens in doing this work. The ethic of our profession is one of service to the citizens with whom we engage in public administration rather than as the objects of our administering. I have been actively thinking about the themes of public life and civic education throughout my professional life, and my time...
as a public administrator in state government helped to jump start this investigation. I see my transition to community college administration as fully congruent with that—colleges are, after all, public institutions too. Though we don't usually view administration of a college as similar to administration of a state agency, the issues at stake are remarkably similar: ensuring public stewardship, defining what a public good actually is and who has ownership of it, defining public service rather than private employment, and policymaking in public service. I must admit I am proud to be a public administrator, serving now in the administration of a community college.

**Brown:** Thank you, Bernie. Your example and leadership in the community college world is most important.
THE UNIVERSITY ROLE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Serving as a Spark to Community Building
Christa Daryl Slaton

Reprinted from the 2005 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

Throughout my academic life, both as a student and a professor, I have never lost sight of where I began my academic pursuits and how my personal journey in education has been influenced and facilitated by those whom I sought to emulate. As an insecure student from a working-class background, I often felt inadequate and ill prepared for the challenges of higher education. Yet, I found within the academy several professors who recognized my thirst for knowledge and saw my potential for accomplishing goals that I believed were beyond my reach. They did more than teach: they listened. They cared about more than demonstrating their expertise—they also empowered me by imparting knowledge that would increase my sense of efficacy and that would diminish my dependence on them for answers to questions.

As I experienced the transformational process of moving from feelings of isolation and inadequacy in graduate school at the University of Hawaii to the exhilarating effects of assisting political science professors on research projects designed to engage citizens in representative government, I realized my professional path would be guided by the question: How could I use my expertise to help others realize and fulfill their potential to become effective democratic citizens? In the course of my research in deliberative public opinion polling and alternative dispute resolution, I came to realize that citizens have far greater capacity for decision making, deliberating, collaborating, and striving for the common good than is often presumed or expressed in academic literature. As my professors had seen in me, I saw in citizens the competence to deal with complex issues and I recognized their untapped potential to work together to address public policy issues. This perspective guided my research approach as I, a University of Auburn professor, entered an impoverished, polarized rural community in Alabama.

As a land grant university, the university’s mission is to improve the
lives of Alabamians and to strengthen the communities in which they live. For the last five years, the university has focused many of its efforts in the Black Belt region, which is named for a deposit of dark, fertile soil extending from Mississippi’s border through the heart of Alabama. This region was once the backbone of the state’s agricultural economy. Today, the region is besieged by pervasive poverty and economic stagnation—the worst in the nation by most standards. My research was concentrated in Uniontown, one of the poorest communities in the region—a community where hopelessness, frustration, and distrust were prevalent among the residents.

The year prior to my research in Uniontown, a coalition of seven universities in the state created a partnership with state and federal agencies to guide the city in developing a strategic plan. Although their intent was to engage a broad group of citizens in the planning process, the university outreach personnel worked through the mayor, who personally selected the citizens to be involved in the process.

While there was enthusiastic involvement from members outside of Uniontown, the participation of local citizens was limited. The kick-off rally for the strategic-planning process included more outsiders than citizens. Only one white resident in the predominantly African American community participated. Young people were conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, university outreach faculty proceeded with the biweekly meetings with the small group of residents and produced a draft of the “Uniontown 2020” strategic plan. At this point, I was invited into the project to expand citizen input as the draft was disseminated for discussion and revision.

As a newcomer to the planning process and an outsider who lived more than a hundred miles from the town, I spent most of my time in the initial meetings as an observer, listening to the participants and taking extensive notes. My early assessment during this phase was that the plan was not community-generated. It was a professionally prepared document that relied largely on outside expertise and one that presented a grand image for a revitalized community. The draft did not establish priorities or detail how the community would proceed to accomplish its lofty goals.

My first year in the project was immensely educational and frustrating. It was the first time I had engaged in a community project that was organized so hierarchically and was so dominated by outside experts. I have long adhered to Carl Friedrich’s view of public policymaking—experts should be on tap, not on top. Contrary to that view, each meeting was dominated by white professionals who lived outside the community. The local residents, most of
whom were professional, middle-aged African Americans, attended sporadically and sat passively throughout most of the planning sessions.

Although my university colleagues recognized the imbalance in the participation, they drew different conclusions than I. The passivity of the local residents led them to conclude that the residents lacked “leadership capacity” and this presented further evidence that the outside experts needed to lead them through the planning process. I, on the other hand, concluded that the “experts” needed to be more circumspect. The Uniontown participants included a doctor, a former school principal, a city council member, and a minister. How, I wondered, could these accomplished individuals lack “leadership capacity”? Why were they so uninvolved in the process? To my colleagues, the completion of the strategic plan was a *sine qua non* for success. While I concurred that this was a worthy goal and an important element in improving the governance in the town, I also believed that the plan would be insufficient and potentially harmful if it did not engage diverse citizens in the process.

My prior research led me to question our top-down approach to the community. My observations led me to hypothesize that the assembled citizens did not believe their voices were heard or valued. Even though all the local participants had been handpicked by the mayor, he was a leader with his own vision and goals and appeared to value loyal disciples. He was respected by the members of the group because he genuinely cared about the greater good and he worked tirelessly to improve the community. Yet his tenacious commitment to *his* vision left many who had different concepts of how to reinvigorate the economic and civic life feeling shut out.

It was my view that the close relationship between the university outreach workers and the mayor fostered the disengagement of the citizens.

As my colleagues and I discussed how citizen participation could be broadened in the next phase of the strategic-planning process, which would establish priorities and develop implementation strategies, I proposed a less traditional approach to attracting citizens. It is a common phenomenon in strategic planning to utilize the “blue-ribbon commission” model of citizen input, which taps elites in the community. A more egalitarian and widely used model is the open public hearing that invites all citizens to attend. This model, however, tends to attract those citizens who are already actively
engaged in the community and it can often attract polarizing, vested interests that seek a particular agenda that favors one segment of the population.

My dissertation research in deliberative public opinion polling, which included 400 to 1,200 randomly selected participants in 12 projects, taught me that there is an enormous latent democratic capacity in American public life. These findings are consistent with Ned Crosby’s work on citizen juries or policy juries, James Fishkin’s Deliberative Poll, and Alan Kay’s consensus-building polling process. Many more citizens are informed or aspire to be better informed than one might assume. Yet citizens often lack the belief that those in power care what they think. I, therefore, chose to use a more grassroots or democratic approach to broadening citizen participation, while my colleagues continued to work exclusively through the mayor to identify additional citizens to be involved in the process.

With the assistance of a graduate student and a staff member in the university’s outreach office, I began to conduct interviews throughout the town. The university hired a local resident to provide administrative assistance and to serve as a liaison between the university, the mayor, and the local residents. The four of us represented age, race, and gender diversity. We also had different personalities and political perspectives. This diversity helped us create a synergistic research team that could reach into many different facets of the community. We gathered varied perspectives on the history of the town and the problems and promises residents saw in efforts to invigorate the economic and civic life in the community. In discussions with educators, business owners, and public housing staff, we detected a combination of hope and despair. Most remembered the prosperity of the community when the region was the backbone of the state’s agricultural economy and was the site of several factories. They all wanted to recapture the past glory because they were emotionally rooted to the place of their birth, their family connections, and their land. The departure of industry and the decrease in farming only magnified the polarization among the 3,500 residents. Each person placed blame for the decline on different segments of the community. Yet each person interviewed expressed a love of small-town life, a pride in the history of the town, and a desire to aid in rejuvenating the community. Sharing common desires, they lacked a sense of how to work together.

There is an enormous latent democratic capacity in American public life.
To immerse ourselves more in learning from a larger and more varied segment of the community, we placed questionnaires all over town that residents could fill out and place in boxes located in shopping areas, government buildings, and recreational sites. We asked two questions: (1) What do you like about your town? and (2) What would you change about your town? When there was minimal response to this open inquiry that allowed anonymity of the respondents, we took to the streets of Uniontown. After driving three hours from the university to the town, we would spend the rest of the day visiting government offices and businesses and walking the streets meeting and conversing with residents. We would introduce ourselves and briefly explain that we were in the community to assist them in planning for the future. We spent most of our time getting to know them, learning about their interests and activities, and discovering how they were rooted in the community. We also asked each person to fill out the brief survey. Not only did most residents complete the questionnaires, but they expanded on their comments to us personally. We shared many lively exchanges with residents who ranged in age from high school students to senior citizens.

As we spent more time in Uniontown, we found ourselves welcomed by those we had never met. Citizens would go out of their way to come shake our hands, thank us for being in town, and offer to help us any way they could. All of this goodwill came about purely on the basis of our asking questions, listening, and demonstrating a genuine desire to help them work together to achieve their goals. It was an extraordinarily different dynamic between the community residents and the university “experts” than I had witnessed in my early involvement in the Uniontown meetings.

A surprising finding of our surveying the town was the commonality in the responses. Regardless of age, race, or occupation, the residents largely identified the same things they liked about the town and what they wanted to change. There was much less racial polarization on issues than the outsiders and many local leaders had presumed. We saw this as an extremely important finding that we could utilize to bring residents together in collaborative, deliberative discussion to give authenticity, life, and energy to the strategic-planning process.

Our next step was to hold public meetings to create the public space for the citizen dialogue. My previous research indicated that if we wanted to attract citizens from varied walks of life, we needed to actively recruit participation. Demographic data revealed that more than 90 percent of the Uniontown residents belonged to one of the 20 churches in town. These churches were as varied as the stately Episcopal church, attended only by whites, and
the historic, grand Baptist church, founded by former slaves—churches in the most prosperous areas and those in the poorest. We believed that if each church sent at least one member to the public meetings, we could have racial and economic diversity in the meetings. We sent letters to each church explaining the purpose of the meetings and stressing the importance of encouraging all concerned citizens to attend. To help assure a mix in ages and gender, we developed a random scheme and requested that churches send at least one of their members who represented a specific gender and particular age range.

This plan was largely a failure since few attendees at the initial meeting came as a result of letters sent to the churches. Nevertheless, we attracted some participants through this method—a minister and his schoolteacher wife and a school janitor and his wife and teenage daughter. Others were recruited through our interviews and chance encounters. We extended personal invitations to each person we met, including a longtime resident we approached just hours before the meeting. He expressed the view that no one cared what he thought and he believed these types of activities were a waste of time. We assured each person we invited that we really valued their input and that their contributions would help make the event successful. It is important to note that the gentleman who thought no one cared about his views became one of the most influential members of the group and served as a marvelous resource for historical background, explanation of the political processes in town, and identification of persons to involve in our activities.

Several months after adopting a more democratic model for broadening citizen involvement in the planning process, the mayor, with whom my colleagues had partnered, was soundly defeated in his re-election bid. The new mayor, a strong critic of the autocratic style of the outgoing mayor, distrusted everyone from Auburn University. He believed the strategic-planning process had intentionally excluded many in the community—which, in fact, it had, since the mayor selected only his political supporters. The strategic plan was tossed aside. This actually became a blessing in disguise. Now we were able to facilitate the process by which local citizens articulated their visions and determined how they would go about achieving them.

Over the next two years, we met biweekly with an energized group
of citizens who labeled themselves “Uniontown Cares.” They selected a logo
designed by a high school student that expressed their purpose “to promote
courage, wisdom, and power.” Over time, the group grew in size from ap-
proximately a dozen African American citizens, who expressed disenchantment
with government officials and frustration over their inability to effect positive
change, to a group of more than three dozen, which included whites, elected
officials, and high school students. From the outset, they wanted to be more
than a talking group—they wanted action. Their activities have included several
fundraisers to address community needs, clean-up and beautification projects,
and celebratory activities, such as parades and banquets.

This collaboration did not emerge instantaneously. Initially, the racial
polarization in the group was obvious in their seating patterns and exchanges
at meetings. As we experimented with different seating arrangements (rows of
chairs, circle of chairs, long tables, small tables), we found a way to alter segre-
gated seating. By actively soliciting input from the less-talkative participants, we
were able to initiate a dialogue between blacks and whites. In a few weeks, the
interaction between blacks and whites changed dramatically. They began sitting
side-by-side, patting each other on the back, shaking hands, complimenting
one another, and chatting informally before and after meetings.

My mediation background offered some insights about how to conduct
the public meetings. In the first place, the university personnel did not control
or dominate the meetings. I saw our role as mediators—neutral third parties
who facilitated communication and did very little talking in the sessions. We
discovered we could best serve the community by actively listening and using
communication skills to help them talk to one another to facilitate the process
of deliberation among them. Consistent with most public meetings, an agenda
was developed for each meeting and was widely disseminated. Yet we did not
adhere rigidly to the agenda and were not guided by Robert’s Rules of Order. In
fact, some of our most fruitful discussions were those that deviated from the
formal agenda and led participants to reminisce, to engage in witty exchanges,
and to brainstorm about new ideas and approaches.

The relationship between “Uniontown Cares” and the elected leaders was
strained in the early months. A heated exchange between local officials and
residents during the first month led a university outreach faculty member, who
was observing the meeting, to publicly chide residents about their inappropri-
ate behavior and unproductive hostility. He had come to Uniontown to teach
leadership skills and used the meeting to assert his expertise in that area. Feeling
scolded and dismissed, the residents promptly told him he was out of order.
They told him he was an outsider who knew nothing about their problems and
they did not appreciate his telling them how to express themselves.

Some of my colleagues saw this exchange as an indication that the group was plagued by angry anarchists and needed to be reigned in by professionals who knew how to control emotional outbursts. I held a different view. One of the components of successful conflict resolution is allowing the parties to vent. These residents had not used profane language and had not attacked anyone’s character, but they did express in very candid terms their dissatisfaction with elected officials and their frustration at not being heard.

It took a while before elected officials returned to the “Uniontown Cares” meetings. In the meantime, we worked with residents to identify their goals, to tackle projects to improve the community, and to provide research and resources that were useful to their activities. We also encouraged them to express their appreciation every time they received assistance from government officials, to attend city council meetings, and to invite collaboration from government when it would benefit the community. It took less than a year for the divide between government and citizens to close. The new mayor learned that by supporting the initiatives of citizens, he would get more accomplished. The residents learned that their working together and approaching elected officials with concrete plans and implementation strategies was a far more productive technique than playing more passive roles that entailed reacting to action or inaction by the government.

In the last year, “Uniontown Cares” has turned itself into a legally recognized, nonprofit group designed to serve the community. Its elected officers represent the gender, racial, occupational, and age mix of the town. The mayor’s mother, the current president of the group, embraced me after one of our meetings and commented on her assessment of Auburn University’s role in the community. She cheerfully stated, “You’re the spark that brought this town to life.” It is gratifying to see the enthusiasm exhibited by residents who are united in their love of their town and see them recognize their own abilities to make a difference by working together to address social, economic, and political problems.

What was the university’s role? We listened. We got to know the citizens. We saw their talents, their commitment, and their energy. We primarily served as mediators, who aided them in listening to one another, in recognizing their common vision, and in moving beyond feelings of frustration and
isolation to a sense of shared possibilities. For me personally, I saw the extension of my professors’ influence on my life. In helping me recognize my potential, they opened my eyes to the potential in others. Through their encouragement, they got me to see past my limitations and to see the wonderful possibilities before me. And through my activities in Uniontown, I have come to learn how rewarding it is to encourage and see others emerge more confident and competent in their endeavors.
LIVING DEMOCRACY
A Project for Students and Citizens

Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley

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Living Democracy is a project for students and citizens who want to develop the capacities of others to solve the problems that matter most to them. Auburn University’s role is one of convenor and moderator, bringing together diverse people and perspectives to see what we might be able to accomplish together. We at the university have some information to share and some background knowledge that needs to be conveyed, but our main task is to ask questions and facilitate a process that will fulfill our public mission through the lives of citizens with whom we collaborate.

“Even though a place may be small, it takes many intricate relationships to run it, and those relationships can lead to success or failure,” wrote student Blake Evans, reflecting on his first week of living in Linden, Alabama, during the summer of 2012. Blake Evans is one of seven Auburn University students who “lived democracy” in Alabama communities as part of the College of Liberal Arts’ program that helps students experience democratic civic engagement in the nation’s best classroom—a local community where people are making decisions and taking action on issues that concern them. Blake’s “community instructors” came from a variety of backgrounds, since small towns are often much more diverse than stereotypes suggest, and the knowledge they imparted to him through everyday conversations and actions will continue to shape his understanding of what it takes to make democracy work as it should.

Over the past several decades, colleges and universities have increased their capacity to provide community-service experiences for students like Blake—those inclined to make a positive difference in the world and give back to society. Some faculty use service experiences with reflection to achieve learning outcomes in courses, and the range of academic disciplines incorporating the pedagogy is broad. Service and service-learning experiences cultivate among participating students a sense of pride, and structured reflection challenges students to draw conclusions, ask questions, and practice the kind of reflective examination required of productive adults in society. The nonprofit organizations providing social services in communities, not to mention the countless young people
tutored and befriended by college students nationwide each year, appreciate these efforts.

Service and service-learning opportunities allow students some interaction with problems that can be found in a democratic society—poverty, unemployment, crime, at-risk youth, cultural and historical ignorance, violence—but these experiences do not provide the context for students to grapple with the problems of democracy itself. Self-rule imposes on citizens the challenge of working through issues and decisions that matter most at any particular time. As Blake identified during his first week in Linden, an important network of collaborative relationships determines the health and future of a community, not to mention its level of resilience against forces of change that are beyond its control. What Blake experienced through a living-learning summer in Linden, Alabama, as described in this article, is wholly different from what can be learned through service or service-learning experiences, and, if successful, will contribute to his understanding of citizenship, community, and the public good in a lasting and meaningful way.

“Living Democracy” is an experiment in democratic civic engagement and politics, the building of civic capacities, and will to solve issues that matter to all of us. The project, begun in 2010, rests on the following assumptions:

- Politics is best understood as the work citizens do with each other and with governments to change their communities. Politics is a public activity, not just the election of leaders and the passage of legislation.

- The best student learning occurs when students take responsibility for their learning. Responsibility comes partly through choices, decisions, and consequences.

- Local communities desire relationships with a university that are ongoing, purposeful, just, and mutually beneficial.

- To understand democratic politics in a community, students need to live in a community for a period of time. There is no substitute for living in a community.
The Process

Colleges and universities, especially those with a major focus on research and application, tend to relate to citizens and communities as either research subjects or consumers of products and services, rather than producers of knowledge and repositories of valuable lived experiences. No process for collaboration can completely bridge these complementary worlds, but we seek to build one in which the conversation begins where citizens begin, appreciating their civic learning experiences as valuable texts.

In November 2010, professors Wilson, Fairley, and Ralph Foster, director of AU’s Office of Public Service, convened community collaborators to introduce the project and develop a sense of what might be accomplished. Our colleagues come from a variety of backgrounds and professions—school teacher, mayor, pastor, city clerk, nonprofit social service organization, community development corporation, historical site director, chamber of commerce—although the title “community developer” is appropriate for each of them, since they actively work across different sectors and have a commitment to improving their community as a whole, not just a particular area of interest or concern. So we asked them to turn their reflections into civic learning by asking them “What have you learned about community development over the years?” and “What things would you do differently if you could?”

We asked our colleagues to think of their community as a classroom. What might students learn as a result of living and working alongside citizens for a summer? How might the presence of a student affect citizens? What do we hope students will take away from the experience? The variety of responses can be best summarized as “learning how to get things done,” which includes communication skills (speaking and listening), discerning aspects of power that are often hidden, and turning failure into a learning experience, rather than a stopping point. They identified several contributions that they believed students could make, including “bridging the gap” between age groups in the community and modeling for everyone important ways to connect to young people in the community.

At the conclusion of the November workshop, colleagues completed a “Telling Your Story” questionnaire, adapted from the Harwood Institute’s “Seven Knowledge Keys for Understanding a Community” report. The questionnaire prompted participants to identify, in their own words, the aspirations of citizens for their community, the civic places where people create community, the concerns people talk about, and stereotypes about the community. Participants also identified the sense of place that an “incomer”—someone who is not an “outsider” to a community, but one who has “come
into” the community by invitation and with a spirit of collaboration, openness, and exchange—might discover. As a way to begin our community collaboration over the immediate spring semester, Professor Fairley, who has been active in civic engagement for most of her more than twenty years at AU, assigned students in her community journalism course to visit the communities and write feature stories that were compiled in Front Porch magazine, an online publication that became a basis for information on the communities for Living Democracy students. We did not convene community collaborators again as a group until August of 2011, when most met their Living Democracy student for the first time.

From Classroom to Community

Blake Evans grew up in the small town of Deatsville, Alabama, and he was the third generation to graduate from Holtville High School, which was the subject of a 1946 United States Information Services film documenting daily life in a Southern, rural community. Having participated in numerous service opportunities through school and church, the Living Democracy program interested him because of its community-building aspects and opportunity to gain valuable experience, particularly in his major of communications. He does not know exactly what type of profession he would ultimately like to pursue, and he is typical of most of the cohort of Living Democracy students who want to be prepared for a variety of opportunities.

Shortly before the fall semester began, Blake and his cohort met their community collaborators at a workshop in Fairhope, where he met Linden city clerk Cheryl Hall. The city of Linden, population 2,123, is located in west-central Alabama, away from interstates, and not too far from the Mississippi state line. White citizens are a slight majority (51 percent), with African Americans making up 46.7 percent of the population. Not unlike many rural communities in the South, the public school enrolls African American students, while the private Marengo Academy educates white students just down the street. The schools’ football teams had long shared a common field, but at the time of the workshop, the community was in the middle of a dispute that left the public school playing its games out of town for the immediate season. The nearest metropolitan newspaper reported that Linden was a town divided by race, a notion that some
locals consider an inaccurate and shortsighted characterization.

At the workshop, Hall represented Linden native and mayor, Mitzi Gates, who had already begun the new school year in her “day job” as English teacher at Linden High School. The workshop led student/citizen groups to answer the following three questions: Who is our community? What are the opportunities for our community? What are the challenges facing our community? Each group mapped the sources of knowledge in or about the community (i.e., people, places, things), and then drew lines representing connections or relationships between each source of knowledge. Students listened while community members reflected on what their citizens seem to value most and learned about the traditions and activities that reflect what they hold valuable. Students asked questions related to challenges and opportunities, and they compared the communities under discussion with the community in which they were reared.

Just a few short days after the workshop in the fall, 2011 semester, Blake and the cohort enrolled in CCEN 2000: Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement, a course that seeks to introduce the context, issues, skills, and experience for living in a democratic society. Students learn about democracy from the time of the Greeks and early Americans, and they consider some modern theories and research related to civic participation and involvement. But the core of the course is about the nature of problems—“wicked” vs. “tame”—and the ways in which the public might develop sound judgments and secure commitments to act together on these problems. But Linden was close to Blake’s mind, since he read his copy of the Linden Democrat-Reporter each week. During the holiday break, he visited Linden for the first time and participated in Chilly Fest, the town’s annual winter festival.

A 2012 spring journalism seminar on Communication and Community Building gave Blake and his cohort a crash course in writing for the public—a skill not likely developed in their respective majors—and helped them acquire a number of additional skills, while they made collaborative summer plans with their partners. Building on the framework of www.coveringcommunities.org, students studied the basics of journalism, wrote profile stories, and conducted interviews. They also created a number of social media tools to help them document their summer experience. Blake visited Linden one additional time during the spring semester, when Mayor Gates led him on a tour of the most unique of all Living Democracy student accommodations: a room above the B. W. Creel Fire Station. While he would spend his nights hoping sleep would go undisturbed by a fire call, he worked out of City Hall during the day.
More at Stake

In January 2012, we convened our students and community collaborators for a workshop to plan summer projects. We asked each community to develop ideas for a project based on past conversations, visits to the community, and interests of both the students and citizens. Some teams had a general direction or theme for a project, while others had numerous details. The project idea or general direction is important, but not every project can build the capacity of citizens to solve the problems that matter to them. Some community projects, unfortunately, erode citizen will and capacity. A project could only be a Living Democracy project, we suggested, if teams worked through and incorporated five different aspects: hopes; a table; conversations and crossroads; actions; public celebration and reflection. Participants discovered these through the following questions:

Hopes

Every community has dreams, goals, and aspirations. What are citizens seeking to do to fulfill the community’s potential? How will your project connect to citizen concerns and what people in the community consider valuable?

A Table

Every community project has a table where thoughts are shared and plans are made. Are people in the community already at a table working on the problem? Who, specifically, needs to be at the table for what you are hoping to organize citizens to do? Why will they want to be at the table? What might prevent them from being at the table?

Conversations and Crossroads

Communication is key to productive human relationships and the work citizens seek to do together. And the communication we are talking about is different from publicity and advertising. How will you communicate regarding the project? How often? Where? Some of these conversations will result in decision making. What decisions do you think will need to be made regarding the project? What decisions will be difficult but necessary? What will you do to make your conversations creative and productive?

Actions

What actions will need to take place to execute the project? When? Make a timeline for what needs to take place immediately, as well as over the next few months, as you prepare to live in the community.
Public Celebration/Reflection

We measure the success of our projects in terms of what we’ve learned and experienced. There is no such thing as failure, only failure to learn. And there’s nothing more fun than a culminating event that documents, makes public, and celebrates the work of citizens. How will you document, celebrate, and lead a public reflection on your project?

A Living Democracy project cannot be mapped out in complete detail because the project’s success is dependent on a process that thrives on unpredictability. We do not expect participants to have answers to each of these questions, but we do expect students to understand the questions and why they matter.

Through his conversations with Mayor Gates and Cheryl Hall, Blake discovered that the city of Linden received assistance from neighboring University of West Alabama to develop a promotional video on the city for economic development purposes. The opportunity for Blake to learn about a community’s desire to communicate its assets became a perfect project to coordinate. He became the script developer, which meant that he had to ask questions and listen to citizens, discover on his own the community’s strengths, and manage all of the various details that preproduction would entail. In a very real sense, Blake helped create the space for citizens to speak to the world. In week nine of his ten-week summer, Blake introduced the video crew to each interviewee during two jam-packed days of filming.

Throughout the school year and into the summer, Blake followed the football field situation, and he learned that although race relations need improvement in towns such as Linden, some efforts were under way that were designed to make a difference. He found the local Youth Leadership Council, created by Mayor Gates and others to bring students from both schools together for shared experiences, an important local activity, and he decided to organize a project among the council teens in town during the summer. Mayor Gates requested support from the town’s Industrial Development Board, a modest amount of $350 to $500, but when the IDB heard the details of the effort, they tripled the amount and appropriated $1,500 because the project was innovative and unique. Blake distributed single-use cameras to students and asked them to take two pictures: one of something they believe illustrated why “Life is good in Linden,” and another that identified an aspect of Linden that needed improvement.
Measuring What You Can’t Count

Students who take responsibility for their learning live a life of reflection. Living Democracy students are required to reflect almost daily through email correspondence with us. “If you don’t write it down, it didn’t happen,” we remind them, and more written communication means more opportunities for reflection, thus learning. We (students and faculty) participate in a conference call, usually lasting an hour, where we go town by town, each student reporting on the past and upcoming week. Complaints and frustrations are welcomed, even encouraged, although they are always outweighed by stories of success or pleasant surprises. Students start to understand each town better over time, even if they have never set foot in the place.

Students must submit weekly written reflections for publication on the Living Democracy blog, and the prompt each week focuses on an aspect of democratic life and practice: the unique aspects and hopes and dreams of the community; ways in which citizens are tackling a persistent problem; civic spaces; community communication; institutional politics; and how the project is building the capacities needed for democratic citizenship. The reflections are for public viewing, and we believe they are valuable texts for citizens to gauge student learning and interaction. Some reflections suggest that students are grappling with the challenges of living in a democratic society, while others reveal that students are simply experiencing their comfort zones stretched. A post-summer interview with each student will document what students believe they have learned as a result of the process.

Mayor Gates and Blake were astounded when the Chronicle of Higher Education sent a photographer to spend an entire day following Blake from meeting to meeting and place to place for photographs that would illustrate an article on the program. A positive article in the Chronicle is high praise for those in higher education, but it is not necessarily an indication of success. During the same week in Linden, a more accurate milestone of success was achieved when city clerk Cheryl Hall and Mayor Gates invited Blake to be the grand marshal of the 2012 winter Chilly Fest parade in December. The parade in Linden will not be covered nationally, of course, and Blake’s participation might be difficult to include in a curriculum vitae, but it is evidence that he has become a citizen of Linden and that the contribution of his presence and collaborative work had lasting value and meaning.
Alexis Sankey

Alexis Sankey, a sophomore majoring in psychology, spent her summer living democracy in Elba, Alabama (pop. 3,940). Her main community partner was Mart Gray, pastor of the Covenant Community Church.

To meet the community’s need for more opportunities in arts education, Alexis created JumpstART, which offers art classes to local children at the Just Folk Coffeehouse and Arts Center. Alexis said her greatest reward came from seeing the children’s smiles of pride at the concluding art exhibition.

After getting JumpstART in motion, Alexis interviewed citizens committed to moving Elba forward and worked closely with the staff of Elba’s Senior Citizen Center, delivering hot meals and helping out in the office.

While the children gained new avenues of expression through JumpstART, Alexis found a new sense of confidence. “I have definitely gained more self-assurance. I realize that progress is not easy, especially when working with and depending on lots of different people. However, it’s always possible.”

Angela Cleary

For Angela Cleary, an interdisciplinary studies major with a keen interest in environmental issues, Bayou La Batre (pop. 2,558) was an ideal place to experience living democracy. On Mobile Bay in southwest Alabama, Bayou La Batre continues to face challenges created by disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Angela partnered with the local Boat People SOS office, an organization involved in recovery efforts, which works closely with the community’s significant Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian population in Alabama’s seafood capital.

Working with BPSOS’s youth empowerment program, Bayou HOPE, was Angela’s most rewarding experience. The youth organized beautification projects and community dinners, and followed a “work hard, play hard” mantra. Angela said, “These projects paved the way for the youth to become active citizens who take ownership and pride in their community.”

She said her summer also changed the way she thinks of traditional classroom lessons. “There are only so many things you can learn from a textbook before you have to put yourself out of the safe zone and test some theories for yourself.”
Mary Afton Day

Mary Afton Day, a junior majoring in public administration, lived democracy in Marion, Alabama (pop. 3,686) and worked with citizens and director Frances Ford through the nonprofit organization Sowing Seeds of Hope.

From sorting green beans at a local church, performing blood pressure checks at a rural community center, and mentoring local teens, Mary Afton went in dozens of different directions to gain an understanding and appreciation of how local people meet challenges on a daily basis.

Throughout the summer, she asked citizens to share images of the places in town that make Marion unique and important, and the project culminated in a public exhibition and companion blog featuring the work of citizens.

Mary Afton said one of her most rewarding experiences was spending time with the ladies of the West Perry Arts & Crafts Club, who quilt together and find ways to share their wisdom with young people in the community.

Audrey Ross

Audrey Ross, a sophomore math major, started the Youth Leaders of Valley while living democracy in Valley (pop. 9,524), a town in east Alabama with a rich textile mill heritage. Youth Leaders grew into a team under Audrey’s guidance as they helped with a police academy for youth, planned and staged a successful Community Day basketball tournament, spruced up the local Girl Scout hut, and attended city council meetings.

Audrey is confident that Youth Leaders will continue. “Rather than tell the kids what to do, we came together and discussed what we COULD do. As the kids became more comfortable in having a say in their community, the ideas came rolling in.”

Audrey also helped out at the community farmers’ market, tutored students of all ages, and learned more about mill restoration projects and community history. She worked closely with Valley police officer Sandra Crim and community partners Jim Jones and Martha Cato.

Audrey described Living Democracy as “an opportunity for a student to grow by watching the growth of others. It’s a way to show someone that, while they are part of a much larger world, they can still have a big impact on many people.”

She added, “I learned that good ideas will get support, and with the right support those ideas can be realized. It is in this way, not with one person doing all the work but with one idea sparking the work of everyone, that one person can bring about significant change.”
Andrew Odom

From living in a “haunted” antebellum home in downtown Selma (pop. 20,756) to involving teens at Alabama’s most famous ghost town, Old Cahawba, Andrew Odom discovered how to connect the past to the future.

Andrew, an Auburn University graduate now in law school, created a team of teens who helped launch a public-use bike program at the Old Cahawba Park. Youth wearing Living Democracy shirts coordinated the launch event, which was attended by local politicians, media, and civic leaders. Other summer events connected youth to local officials, civic leaders, educators, and artists.

Andrew’s main community partners were Old Cahawba site director Linda Derry and Selma/Dallas County Chamber of Commerce executive director Sheryl Smedley.

Andrew counts his conversations with local leaders one day and with those struggling with poverty the next as one of the most rewarding aspects of his experience. “I was able to listen and discuss concerns and possible solutions with both.”

Marian Royston

Marian Royston, a senior history major, lived democracy in one of the most historic communities in Alabama, Hobson City (pop. 771). Founded in 1899, Hobson City was the first all African American municipality in Alabama.

In part, Marian was on a mission to bring together a snapshot of Hobson City’s present through her work on a community needs assessment. However, by the end of the summer, her passion turned her toward a focus on one of the community’s greatest assets: history.

One of her projects involved collecting, sorting, and preserving stories of the community’s rich past, told in photographs and other historic documents.

Marian’s community partners were Hobson City Community and Economic Development Corporation (HCCEDC) board members Eric Stringer, Charity Richey-Bentley, and Bernard Snow. Marian said one lesson she learned by spending time with citizens was that “building relationships may very well be the first and most important step in enacting change in a community.”
TALES FROM ANTI-CIVIC U

Claire Snyder-Hall

Reprinted from the 2012 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

I left a tenured position in academia this year because I was no longer happy with the quality of life it was providing me—with the degree to which it enabled me to link my public and professional lives. It was always a struggle to do public work within the parameters of what would be rewarded by my institution. Doing well at my job was important to me, and so my goal was to excel professionally, while also doing work that had public relevance and mattered politically. I was able to do all that, but it was a twelve-year struggle.

Don’t get me wrong. My university was not particularly hostile to public work. To the contrary, it was simply a typical second-tier research university that modeled itself after what more prestigious research institutions are like—or what it thinks they are like. The challenges were exacerbated by the university’s location in a major metropolitan area, characterized by suburban sprawl, frustrating commutes, and a careerist vibe.

Over the course of the twelve years I served on the faculty, the university grew tremendously in ways that made it more prestigious, which is a good thing in academic terms. This transition entailed the proliferation of doctoral programs, the valorization of research over all other activities, the fixation on peer-reviewed journal articles, the demand for increasing quantities of publications, the prioritization of graduate over undergraduate teaching, and the preprofessionalization of undergraduate education. As the process of institutional advancement unfolded, the university’s incentive structure evolved in ways that made it more difficult to do work with public relevance.

More specifically, as the university sought higher rankings, the college promotion and tenure (P&T) committees that I sat on came to insist, more and more, that only blind-peer-reviewed journal articles and books should be counted as legitimate scholarship. Publications aimed at a nonacademic audience were completely disregarded, and collaborative work was viewed with suspicion: “How much did the applicant really contribute to the work?” The committee began to consider how often a publication was cited by other academics as evidence necessary for an evaluation of excellence. When applicants included significant community work in their dossiers—even high profile projects that seemed very impressive—it was relegated to the category of teaching (not scholarship), and you could not get promoted on
the basis of excellence in teaching anymore—not like before—unless you had published the requisite number of peer-reviewed articles about pedagogy, thus turning teaching into the subject of your scholarship.

Moreover, the quality of faculty life deteriorated, as the university’s institutional ranking rose. Some of those who were most successful at high-status activities—or who had already been promoted to full and didn’t have to worry—began to advocate posttenure review policies that would penalize their colleagues who were merely solid scholars and/or dedicated teachers, rather than celebrity scholar wannabes. It seemed as if the pretenure treadmill, which traditionally lasted only five years, was to become the new normal—eroding the possibility of work-life balance and time for community engagement. In addition, as the years rolled by it became more common for some of my colleagues to use review time to pick apart a person’s record, criticizing even those who were publishing in top journals or presses for not doing even better. Ironically, several recipients of that type of treatment ended up leaving for better jobs.

During my twelve years at what I will henceforth call Anti-Civic U (ACU), I struggled in my efforts to introduce a public component into my research, teaching, and service activities. My research agenda has always been driven by a general desire to contribute to the public good. In fact, the original impetus for my application to graduate school was the desire to learn more about the ideas underlying political life. I was very involved in politics at the time, working with several groups that were active in my home state.

As a side note, when I reread the “personal statement” I submitted with my grad school application back in 1988, it is remarkable how brief and general it was—referencing things like my “solid liberal arts background,” my desire to “increase my understanding of the political situation in general,” my love of “learning,” and my plan for “a career of teaching and research.” Indeed, I had hardly any background in political science at all (having been a psychology major), although I did have a strong academic record. The vague language of my essay would never cut it for admission into ACU—at least not in my department. We expect applicants to submit a fully developed plan for specialization, not simply solid credentials and a desire to pursue advanced learning. To me this exemplifies how far down the road of preprofessionalization and specialization academia has gone—a situation that
might be even more pronounced at second-tier schools that are probably less inclined to take a chance on an unorthodox student. Or, to be more factual, my department did admit strong students who did not have a political science background when our graduate programs first started, but stopped doing so as the program sought—and received—higher rankings. Everything has become so competitive.

Because my interest in studying political theory grew out of four years of political engagement, my scholarship always had an applied focus, even if it was sometimes implicit. During graduate school, I began working with the Kettering Foundation, which greatly expanded my understanding of politics and democratic theory. When I went on the job market, my dissertation director advised me to group my Kettering work and some other things I had done under a heading called “applied work on democratic citizenship” on my vita, which I did. ACU seemed to be interested in my work with Kettering, which I saw as a sign that they were interested in civic-engagement work—which to some extent they initially were. However, their real interests became clearer after I was hired, when a senior colleague said, “We are hoping you can teach us how to get grants.” And indeed over time, grant-getting became one of the university’s primary preoccupations and the basis for increased compensation. It probably goes without saying that being a good departmental citizen or strong teacher was not rewarded.

During my tenure-track years at ACU, I struggled to do work that was both civically engaged and countable toward tenure. Over the course of my three pretenure years—I started with two years credit from my first job—the quantity of publications required grew to “a book and six blind-peer-reviewed articles or their equivalent,” which was a larger quantity than was required at many first-tier research universities at the time, assuming what my friends at such schools told me was accurate. Personally, I found it nearly impossible to write articles that would both pass blind-peer-review in political science journals and also be of interest to a public readership, although I know that some people can do it. I found those two types of writing too different in terms of both subject matter and mode of presentation to be easily combined.

Because many in the political science field claim to do objective research, it is generally a challenge to publish normative work, even when it is rooted in academic literature. A lot of political scientists do not consider normative work scholarly. For example, when I went on my first job interview (at a second-tier state university that could also be called ACU), I used Shutting the Public Out of Politics, which was forthcoming as a Kettering occasional paper at the time, as my writing sample, and I received a surpris-
ingly hostile reception from several members of the faculty. One reportedly called me “a narrow-minded ideologue,” presumably because the essay did not meet the standards of “objective” social science. The next day he angrily told me he had seen my dissertation director on TV the night before, “and he sounded just like you,” which was clearly not a good thing. Another faculty member blasted me for not citing any statistical studies of race and voting behavior in my paper, which was puzzling, considering my paper was about the nineteenth century. And this was at a school that had advertised for a “democratic theorist!” Obviously, an offer was not forthcoming.

While that might seem like an extreme example, I got a similar reaction from some anonymous reviewers of my article on the history of higher education that I originally wrote for the Kettering Foundation. In that case I did end up getting the piece published in the academic journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*, thanks to a supportive editor, but in a section devoted to teaching, which probably didn’t really “count” in the eyes of my colleagues. In any event, I cannot think of another journal that would have even considered the piece. Where does one publish scholarship that focuses on the public?

These experiences highlighted the fact that the questions I was asking in my work with the Kettering Foundation were very different from the questions being asked in the mainstream of my discipline. In addition, the writing style was different in each genre. When I wrote articles for *HEX*, the editors did not want an extensive review of the academic literature or a lot of footnotes. Journals like *Polity, Armed Forces and Society*, or *New Political Science* did. So over time I decided that it was easier to work on two separate research streams, rather than trying to serve both masters.

This was a good decision because when I came up for tenure in 2003, the four essays I published with Kettering did not “count,” nor did the seven other non-blind-peer reviewed publications I completed, mostly chapters in academic edited volumes. While my original chair had suggested that such publications might be “worth something”—I didn’t need them to count, so it was a moot point—these days, any work that is not blind-peer-reviewed is seen as totally worthless in the eyes of the P&T committees in both my department and my college. Unless peer-reviewed, work that addresses public problems is not valued, unless there is grant or contract money for the university attached. Moreover, while some of my colleagues would fight to have a report for the State Department or the Department of Defense recognized as significant research, almost none would consider a work produced with a human rights or civic organization worthy of scholarly recognition. However, if you
could demonstrate that such work had public impact, you might be able to get credit for it under “public teaching,” but certainly not under “scholarship.”

In addition to the frustrations of having a lot of solid work that I valued disregarded, I was also advised by senior colleagues to make my work “sound less relevant” in my tenure narrative. Since I had prided myself on my “applied work” and viewed the relevance of my scholarship as a plus, that advice was startling, although undoubtedly sound. Apparently at ACU, work that is read by only a small group of experts is preferable to that which speaks to a more inclusive audience.

The number of peer-reviewed publications I had to produce to keep my job definitely eroded the time I had for either community engagement or a personal life, and it left me feeling isolated. Consequently, after receiving tenure in 2004, I decided to become more involved on campus, while continuing to pursue a bifurcated research agenda that would allow me to do the work I want to do and also lay the groundwork for promotion to the top rank of full professor. When I was asked to lead the American Democracy Project (ADP) at ACU, I saw it as a great opportunity to deepen the public component of my work by taking part in a national effort to stimulate civic engagement among undergraduates.

Although it was the president of ACU who signed onto ADP, the project did not get much institutional support. Leading the effort was not enabled by course release time or a supplemental stipend (as were graduate directorships), although an administrative staff person was available to provide support, which made the work doable. Although the ADP committee was very large (over seventy members), only a handful of members (zero to six) attended meetings, and while they were helpful in generating ideas, no one was available to help put events together. Over time that made me less interested in trying to bring other faculty members into the planning process. It was simpler to work solo.

It was also disappointing to discover that ACU students were not interested in attending ADP programs—mostly panel discussions on hot topics, like immigration reform, gun control, and the Tea Party, as well as the annual Congressionally mandated Constitution Day celebration of our freedom—unless it was required for class. Of course this should not be surprising. After

*The number of peer-reviewed publications I had to produce eroded the time I had for either community engagement or a personal life.*
all, ADP was a very small program at a university with over 30,000 students, and it was in no way integrated into the curriculum. Most students are very busy and don't have time for unnecessary activities. Consequently, the only way I could turn out an audience was to convince a colleague to bring her class to the event—a strategy that worked pretty well, although it meant that it was mostly government students who attended ADP events.

During my first year as ADP campus coordinator, I attended its national conference and had a real insight about the program’s chances at ACU. I was very impressed that one university—a branch campus of a large state university—sent a large faculty team to the conference, including the provost who led the project on her campus. They did a great presentation on how they were integrating civic issues into the curricular requirements for undergrads, even recording participation on student transcripts. A lot of other campus teams were also from branch campuses. Then, it struck me: ACU would never really get behind ADP because ADP would be considered something more appropriate to a branch campus than to a “rigorous” research university that aspired to national recognition. It seemed that ACU had signed onto ADP simply because the president said, “hey this sounds like a good idea” and then sent the mandate to the provost, who eventually sent it to me. It was barely on the radar with only a $5,000 budget. But at least we could say we were doing civic engagement!

Given my conclusion about ACU’s view of civic engagement work, I was surprised to be invited by the provost to a small meeting of people interested in “civics education.” I was eager to attend and went to several meetings. As it turned out, however, the provost was primarily interested in getting a contract for ACU faculty to write a high school textbook, and in resuscitating state-wide interest in civics so there would be a market for the book. There was also another set of meetings on a civics-related theme that focused on landing a major grant for the university, but I was not invited to attend that one—which was odd because it seems like the two efforts could have been connected to each other and to ADP. Such fragmentation and lack of coordination was typical of ACU in general.

After a couple of years of putting together “cocurricular programming” on public issues, I concluded that ADP could only be successful on campus if there were some sort of curricular tie-in, which ushered in a new, exciting phase in my civic work there. The new associate provost, who was my contact in the provost’s office, was very enamored with the idea of integrating civic themes into the general education curriculum, which he oversaw and which was going through a major renovation in preparation for reaccreditation.
He and I talked about creating a wide range of lower level courses that connected civic themes to a range of disciplines: “The Artist as Citizen,” “The Scientist as Citizen,” “The Dancer as Citizen,” and so forth. He even articulated a link between gen ed and democratic citizenship in the university catalogue—inserting the sentence, “‘Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’—this ringing phrase from the Declaration of Independence makes a fine statement about the ideals of general education (or, as it is more classically called, liberal education) as we strive to articulate it at [ACU].” That insertion prompted one department chair to go around campus expressing outrage at his pro-American bias!

Nevertheless, the associate provost and I decided to put together a faculty team to work on creating a set of new courses that focused on civic themes. With the enticement of a small amount of summer money for participants, I convened a “faculty-learning community” that consisted of eight people from across the university, who were handpicked for their interest in civic engagement. We wanted to move beyond relying only on the humanities and social science scholars who populated the ADP list. The first few meetings were exciting, but then a couple of people dropped out—one suddenly decided she was too busy, the other didn’t want to participate unless we began by scrapping the entire gen ed curriculum, which he repeatedly deemed “a dog’s breakfast.” Two others decided to work by themselves on their own courses, which left a team of four—Dr. Science, Dr. Theater, Dr. English, and myself, Dr. Government.

Our original vision was quite grand. We wanted to change the culture of student nonengagement on campus. We decided that each of us would offer a course centered on civic issues, and they would be taught simultaneously. We would have some joint sessions with special guest speakers who would address public issues that were relevant for all four of our classes. The event would be open to the entire campus, as well as the larger community. The four classes would meet occasionally for interdisciplinary discussions among students. Ideally, student groups would “table” outside the event to stimulate student engagement. The public talks would become major events on campus. We decided that the first step would be to pilot the linked courses and speakers series.

The pilot version of the project was pretty successful overall, yet we ran into a number of institutional barriers. First of all, we had a surprisingly hard
time getting our departments to schedule our classes at the same time. Second, because Dr. English created a truly interdisciplinary course, there was no way to offer it in his department, so he had to run it as a “UNIV” course, which ended up with only three students because it didn’t fulfill any requirements. (Needless to say, the administration was not happy with the low enrollment.) Third, Dr. Science dropped out without telling us, after receiving a grant to “buy-out” her courses. While she kept the summer money for herself, she asked her colleague to take over her role in the project, which he did, but he had little understanding of civic issues and felt that the focus on them detracted from the time he had to spend on his major course material.

The second year began well, although only Dr. English and I remained fully engaged, since the second Dr. Science was no longer interested, and Dr. Theater was appointed chair of his department and had little time for the project, although he still participated. Once again, we had trouble with scheduling. My new chair finally agreed to my time request with the caveat that I would not be accommodated again. Fortunately, Dr. English was able to create a new course that fit within disciplinary boundaries. And Dr. Theater ended up making his course a permanent one, although he no longer had time to teach it.

Overall, I was very happy with the way my courses turned out. The first time I participated in the project, I taught a special version of my 100-level “Democratic Theory and Practice” course, which sounds good, but there were two problems. First, I had 300 students, which was unwieldy for the purposes of the project. Second, since it was a gen ed course and a major requirement, I had a lot of “learning outcomes” to deal with, which made it challenging to teach.

In preparation for the second run-through of the project, I created a brand new interdisciplinary senior “seminar” (capped at 35 students), which worked really well—and also fulfilled a requirement. I organized the course around the question, “Now that you are graduating and becoming a fully participating member of society, what are you going to do to make the world a better place?” I piloted the course in the fall and then taught it as part of the project in the spring.

I wanted to incorporate a civic-engagement dimension into the class. Since I couldn’t manage overseeing a service-learning component, I asked students to choose a public issue they really cared about, analyze it from a values-based perspective, and then write a paper that included a discussion of what they were going to do about it after graduation. The course utilized mostly popular materials from the public sphere—bestsellers, novels, and
films—and the students came up with the idea of doing their presentations as short YouTube videos, which were posted online. It worked really well both times I taught it. The students loved it. They told me that no professor had ever before asked them what they thought about important public issues. In all honesty, teaching those two sections of the senior seminar was the highlight of my teaching career. I was able to use my professional skills to help students see themselves as members of an engaged public, and we discussed issues that really mattered.

My final class at ACU was a 20-person summer section of “Democratic Theory and Practice,” and it was also a pleasure. Due to the small size, I was able to return to the way I taught the course back in 2000 and 2001, when the course was capped at 19 rather than 300. We used David Mathews’ book *Politics for People* as a frame, and as a centerpiece of the course we did “NIF in the Classroom.” And it was amazing. I was stunned by how an extremely skeptical view of deliberation amongst everyone in the class gave way to an amazing deliberative experience. We did the debt issue, and the students found common ground on the need for young people to be educated about financial responsibility. Even students who had never spoken before opened up and shared personal experiences as related to the issue. It was good to end my career at Anti-Civic U on a procivic high note, which is how it all began twelve years ago.

In the end, despite the very negative tenor of this narrative, I actually feel that I had a good run at ACU. I was able to do work I cared about and succeed in the profession. However, as I was talking to my chair about what I had to do to prepare for promotion to full, I decided that I had had enough. Although I believe I could have succeeded at that final goal if I really wanted to—I was told that with two books, an edited volume, twelve peer-reviewed articles, and fourteen essays in edited volumes under my belt, not to mention my Kettering work, I just needed to finish that third book (and Columbia University Press had already reviewed my proposal and requested a sample chapter)—I realized that I just didn’t want to do it anymore. I had already spent twelve years running on the academic treadmill, but where was it actually taking me?
In the end, I resolved my academic midlife crisis by leaving the university. During the second half of my life, I plan to devote my time to doing what I really value without having to focus so much on what external judges think is valuable. I decided to make time to get involved in my actual community and do actual political work, instead of trying to fit what I care about into a structure that is not designed to accommodate it, at an institution that doesn't think the work is very important. So I resigned my position at ACU, and, surprisingly, I am completely unambivalent about that decision. In fact, I am very happy—in both the public and the personal sense.
In 2008, David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Marguerite S. Shaffer about her work as director of American studies and associate professor of American studies and history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

**Brown:** Your current work focuses on public culture in the United States. And so . . .

**Shaffer:** For the past five years I have been seeking ways to integrate my scholarly and teaching interests with larger questions and concerns about the role of higher education, specifically the role of American studies, in preparing students to become engaged citizens and public leaders. I began my tenure as director of American studies at Miami by applying for an NEH Humanities Focus Grant to reassess and revise the curriculum in American studies. Not only was the existing curriculum outdated, but it seemed a little irrelevant to the current needs and concerns of Miami students. I felt the program would benefit from a closer examination of the core intellectual ideas and learning objectives of the field. Specifically, I wanted to really think about what American studies could offer to students and faculty confronting the concerns of our current culture.

In 2002-2003, the Miami American Studies Program was one of twenty-five humanities departments nationwide to be awarded one of these grants. The dialogue this grant supported helped to spearhead a larger discussion about public culture as a central theme in American studies. It spun off into an academic symposium on the transformation of public culture, which resulted in my edited volume of *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States* to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in June 2008, as well as a prototype, multiyear curricular initiative, “Acting Locally: Civic Learning and Leadership in Southwest Ohio,” which was funded by the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute at Miami.

To be perfectly honest, though, I must confess that my turn to public culture stems from a more personal uncertainty about my efficacy and worth as an American studies scholar.

**Brown:** Please go on.

**Shaffer:** I have joked with colleagues that I am in the midst of an academic midlife crisis—questioning every aspect of life in academe. In thinking about my future in the university, I have wondered whether my time
will be well spent researching and writing a scholarly monograph that might well get me promoted, but that will be read by only a handful of like-minded scholars with similar intellectual interests. I have questioned the time I devote to teaching critical-thinking skills to students who are socialized, both inside and outside the university, to care more about their final grades and potential career options than the knowledge they can share and the collective future they will create. As a parent of two young children, I look out to the world and worry about what their futures will be as President Bush and his administration systematically undermine all the American—not just American, the humane—values I hold dear, like “you don’t lie,” “you don’t attack people unprovoked,” “you don’t torture people”—basic stuff. I wonder if my work in the academy is paving the way for a culture I want my children to inherit. On very bad days, I think not. So, I think about public culture as a way to alleviate these uncertainties.

**Brown:** In your introduction to *Public Culture* you speak of your struggle “to promote both cultural competency and cultural agency” as an American studies scholar. Is this part of your “questioning every aspect of life in academe,” including your own field?

**Shaffer:** Most definitely, yes. For the past 20 to 30 years, cultural studies theory has been the driving force in American studies scholarship. Although postmodern theory emerged as part of a politically charged intellectual commitment to egalitarian social change, it has evolved into a kind of cultural or identity politics focusing on the “Other” and interrogating subaltern subjectivity. Much good has come from this work in terms of redressing racism and sexism and empowering marginalized groups to value their distinct cultures. However, the primary focus of this theoretical perspective has elevated “difference” over every other cultural category. In exploring American culture, American studies as a field trains students to examine and dissect issues of social difference—race, class, gender, ethnicity—and to understand theories of hegemony and ideology. In other words, students are taught to deconstruct American culture—they can closely read and parse all sorts of cultural texts, they can critique power structures, and unravel ideological stances and
systems—but they are given few tools or opportunities to move beyond critique to create communities or support or even imagine cultural belonging.

For the past four years, I have team-taught an introductory course in American studies with my colleague, Mary Kupiec Cayton. Semester after semester, we have found that students have made incredible strides in terms of being able to read, write, understand, and critique American culture. But we have also found that at the end of each semester, students leave the course with little hope about the possibilities for changing or impacting American culture—their culture. They have little sense of themselves as shapers of culture. They have little sense of their connection to American culture. It’s almost as if they feel like victims or prisoners of American culture. They see themselves as outside of or beyond the culture they have been studying, like it is not about them. They gain critical thinking skills, but they don’t see themselves as active members of their own culture. They don’t see themselves as cultural agents.

I think the university reinforces this. The liberal arts curriculum, at least at Miami, is still broadly conceptualized in the traditional enlightenment context of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. But as the culture has become increasingly privatized, knowledge is reduced to a credential in the market place rather than a foundation for engaged citizenship and public leadership. So students come to the university so that they can get what they need to find a good job. They understand knowledge and critical thinking skills as bargaining chips in the free market. I struggle to get them to see knowledge as a form of power that can allow them to shape the world in which they will live, in which they do live. I struggle to get them to see the connections between knowledge and action. So I guess to answer your question, I see a real tension between theory and practice in American studies. Postmodern theory has reached a point where it has almost negated the possibility of conscious, meaningful individual action. Yet more than ever, our communities need active participants rather than passive victims or detached critics. So the struggle for me has been how to use the critical perspective of cultural theory to promote, rather than undermine, cultural agency.

Brown: Obviously, you take some exception to a prevailing emphasis in American studies on the issues of “difference and identity,” with insufficient
attention paid to “belonging, collective life, and community.” What encourages you that a shift toward “a shared public culture,” as you have put it, is gaining ground in your field?

**Shaffer:** First, let me say that I think that much of the scholarship in American studies focusing on diversity and difference has been extremely important and necessary work. My concept of the public very much depends on the vision of a multicultural society moved forward by this scholarship. However, I believe it is important not to completely abandon the idea of shared public culture or cultures to the divided concerns of identity politics.

I think, in general, the notion of “a shared public culture” is a little too monolithic and idealistic. And I am definitely not interested in a return to the old Cold War view of American exceptionalism. I think shared public cultures can emerge, but they are temporal and provisional, more “process” than “thing.” It is probably more accurate to say there seems to be a growing interest in the concept of the public.

Probably the most encouraging evidence I can provide is not hard evidence, but rather the response I have had from students and other scholars who are anxious to address public issues. In developing the new major in American studies and providing students with opportunities to engage in communities, I have found that students are transformed when they have the opportunity to put their learning in a larger public context. Similarly, faculty feel like they are using their scholarly expertise to engage real-world issues.

But if you need hard evidence, perhaps the most telling is the thematic focus for the next annual American Studies Convention. The title for the conference is “Back Down to the Crossroads: Integrative American Studies in Theory and Practice.” The call for papers requests proposals that address how American studies scholars can and have integrated their roles as scholars, educators, and citizens.

Probably the most developed and institutionalized example of this kind of scholarly work in American studies is the Imagining America Project, which is a national consortium of colleges and universities that promotes public scholarship in the arts and humanities. But there are other examples on a smaller scale, such as the American studies program at the University of Wyoming, which specializes in training students to engage in public sector work. The American Studies Association also has a community partnership grant program to facilitate this kind of engaged work. Recently funded projects range from a service-learning project with the New Mexico Office of the State Historian to an exhibition of creative work done by young African American residents in the Arbor Hill neighborhood of Albany, New York.
So from my own personal experience to the larger institutional frameworks of the field, I think there is a growing interest in issues relating to the public.

Brown: More importantly, what evidence encourages you that such a shift is gaining ground, not just in American studies but in American life, which you say “increasingly revolves around entertainment, advertising, consumption, spectacle, and image”?

Shaffer: This one I’m not sure I can answer. I go back and forth. Some days, when I interact with people who are involved in trying to better their communities, I have real hope. Other days, when I look at our current political situation, I wonder if I am simply delusional. I have no hard evidence either way. But I get some sense of hope watching my students and seeing what has happened with them as they have become more involved in their communities. In my scholarly work on tourism, I have argued that tourists are not simply dupes or passive consumers of commercial advertising and popular media. I believe that because I do not think of myself as a victim of global consumer capitalism. I am trying to push back. I think—I hope—others are trying to push back as well.

Brown: As you may know, the Kettering Foundation has a long-standing concern that the professional mindset prevailing in higher education too often ignores the “common goods” that only democratic self-rule can provide. Can such a mindset sometimes produce divisions among your colleagues in American studies?

Shaffer: I would not say that the “professional mindset” necessarily produces divisions among my colleagues, but I do think that the way in which the university has institutionalized professional standards most definitely works against a broader notion of shared democratic knowledge production and dissemination, and the way it might be defined in American studies. The bureaucratic process of tenure and promotion, and the narrow compartmentalization of teaching, scholarship, and service, works against the very interdisciplinary and engaged work that can be done in American studies. Perhaps there might be conflict among my colleagues if the university criteria for tenure and promotion defined teaching, scholarship, and service in a more integrated and holistic way. Then I could potentially see those advocating traditional scholarship and teaching questioning faculty members
interested in pushing the boundaries of the scholarship of engagement. But the university has basically cast “the professional mindset” in stone and, although it might encourage innovative community-based, engaged, or public work, professional guidelines for tenure and promotion relegate that kind of work to service, which counts third, way behind scholarship and teaching, in terms of tenure and promotion. What that means for American studies faculty is that, first and foremost, you need a scholarly monograph and good teaching that fits into a standardized three-credit-hour framework; then you can do creative public work above and beyond all that. For a junior faculty member, I just don’t see that as feasible. In fact, for myself, I know that time spent on public work is time taken from the scholarly work I need to complete to get promoted. The university guidelines are clear. So the issue of conflict is moot.

Brown: So the “professional mindset” rules. What a dreary prospect. Let me move on to more positive ground. You speak of “public culture” not as “an end in and of itself,” but rather “an ongoing process.” Could you elaborate on what such a process consists of?

Shaffer: I think there is a desire to see the public or publics as a thing or an entity—an ideal of a participatory democratic society completely conscious of its shared endeavor to create and maintain some sort of shared identity and common goals. But I prefer the concept of the public in contrast to the concept of national identity or national character—concepts that used to be central to the American studies endeavor—as a public less fixed and monolithic, more fluid and adaptable, more provisional and temporal. Publics shift and change; they respond to specific issues and events; they are diverse and divided.

My conceptualization of the public is derived from Hannah Arendt and John Dewey in the context of my training in American studies. In particular, I think Arendt’s image of the public realm as a table around which diverse individuals come together to discuss and debate, to arrive at some sort of common understanding, best embodies how I have come to imagine who constitutes the public or publics. It suggests that every individual is a potential member of a public, and he or she becomes so when he or she begins to engage with other individuals to create shared meaning—even if only temporarily.
What Dewey adds to this is the idea that although liberalism (and here I am
referring to the political philosophy of liberalism) has conditioned us to believe that society all boils down to the individual, in actuality, the individual is completely dependent on and connected to others. My readings of Arendt and Dewey are filtered through concepts of culture that are central to American studies; specifically, the idea that culture is the shared signs, symbols, codes, messages, and contexts that give our individual experience meaning. Clifford Geertz has this wonderful image of culture as a kind of spider web. He says that culture is the web of significance in which we are suspended. For me Geertz’s web is very similar to Arendt’s table.

So, when I say that I see the public as a process, I see it as the process of creating, negotiating, debating, and contesting shared meaning. It is culture-making. It is the act of coming together, or meeting around the table, that brings publics into being. So, I guess I would have to say that when I am talking about publics, I am ultimately talking about the process of public discourse—individuals coming together to discuss, debate, resolve, challenge an issue, address an event, or respond to a problem.

**Brown:** Why, then, do students not see themselves as potential participants in culture-making?

**Shaffer:** The key words here are “potential participants.” For the past thirty years, basically since the election of Ronald Reagan, our culture has become increasingly privatized. The private sphere and the free market have come to dominate civil society or as William Galston has put it, the market has become the “organizing metaphor” for everyday experience. In the process, the concept of the public has become anemic and withered. College students simply reflect the values of our present-day culture. They have been socialized at every turn to understand and think of themselves and their role in society in privatized and individualized terms. They have been conditioned and encouraged to think of culture-making as self-fashioning, self-fulfillment, and self-improvement. They don’t see themselves as participants in a public process. They don’t really imagine themselves as part of a public; rather they are Facebook friends, fans, members of a market segment, part of an identity group. The university encourages this by treating students like customers and presenting knowledge and learning as a product. So students are given few, if any, opportunities to imagine and experience themselves in public terms.

**Brown:** Let’s turn to your “Acting Locally” project in southwestern Ohio. It “explores the intersections between globalization and local transformation.” One of the three communities that are the focus of the project is the Over-the-Rhine
neighborhood in Cincinnati. Could you say more about how “globalization” impacts such a community?

**Shaffer:** At the turn of the 19th century, Over-the-Rhine (OTR) was home to over 40,000 residents who lived and worked in the city. It was one of the most densely populated and diverse neighborhoods in the Midwest. It supported a diversified manufacturing economy in the metropolitan area that produced machine tools, paper, shoes, and soap, among other products. The neighborhood and the city were vitally linked to an interconnected local, regional, and national economy. Globalization has transformed the social and economic landscape of southwestern Ohio in the past half century. The diversified manufacturing economy of the 19th century and early 20th century has all but disappeared. Although Cincinnati is still home base to a number of multinational corporations, the local and regional economy is suffering.

Downtown Cincinnati has sought to rehabilitate its economic base through tourism with the construction of two new stadiums, the renovation of the convention center, and the creation of the Underground Railroad Freedom Center. And although tourism can attract visitors and provide some revenue, it creates predominantly low-paying service sector jobs, caters to outsiders, and effectively transforms metropolitan residents into visitors, audience, and spectators. The present status of OTR reflects some of the deficiencies of this tourist-based solution. The neighborhood is currently home to approximately 7,500 residents, almost 75% of whom are African Americans living below the poverty line. The neighborhood has been plagued by drug trafficking, violent crime, and widespread poverty. There are approximately 106 social service agencies serving OTR, and there are approximately 500 abandoned buildings. As the largest residential neighborhood directly adjacent to the downtown core, Over-the-Rhine is vital to the health of downtown Cincinnati.

**Brown:** In constructing such a project it seems to me there is a “hegemonic” assumption, as you might put it, that globalization undermines or overwhelms local cultures. Since you have been critical of postmodern theory “which effectively denies the possibilities of public culture,” is your project aimed at challenging such an assumption and countering such theory?

**Shaffer:** Last summer, Nan Kari from the Jane Addams School for Democracy said to me that theory presents a mindset and a way of thinking that is almost antithetical to public action and engagement. We were talking about a student who had been interning at the Jane Addams School, and who had then gone on to write a senior thesis about her experience drawing on postmodern feminist theory. I had talked to the student while visiting the
Jane Addams School, and it struck me that she was struggling to reconcile her transformative experience at Jane Addams with her critical assessment of the Jane Addams School. I can relate to that. When I look at the world through the lens of theory, I see no way out. From this perspective, globalization is, in many ways, hegemonic; but within this theoretical construct, you could also say that there are counterhegemonic forces working to challenge and transform the global power structure.

So, I guess I would have to say “yes and no” in answer to your question. Yes, in some ways, I think one of the implicit goals of the Acting Locally project is to empower local communities—to get students to understand that they can partner with community members to be agents of change; to promote and support participatory democratic action; to connect knowledge and power. Within the theoretical construct, this might be seen as counterhegemonic.

But, I also have to say no, because, like Terry Eagleton, I believe it is time for academics to move beyond theory to begin to imagine new ways of creating and using knowledge. So in many ways I see this project as more of a prototype for integrative learning that asks students and faculty to use knowledge and critical thinking not simply to judge and critique, but as a foundation on which to act in the world and to imagine, as Terry Eagleton says, new forms of belonging.

Brown: Part of the strategy for the project is “to identify and study key components of existing sustainable communities in the region.” What “key components” have you found thus far? And assuming you have, what “mechanisms” are being developed that will help to maintain and expand such communities?

Shaffer: Having begun to engage with these communities, “key components” now sounds a little abstract and detached from the life and soul of the communities; it reads like academic-speak. What we have found is that there is a range of people, from individual activists to those working for social service organizations, to others working in nonprofit organizations, who have done incredible work in seeking to better their communities. Whether it be Lourdes Leon, owner of Taqueria Mercado, who has opened her bakery to students involved in a language exchange program, or the sisters at Venice-on-Vine who have worked with students to help create a job internship program, or the members of the MOON co-op who are partnering with students to help support a local food economy in Oxford, there are all sorts of people out there seeking to support and sustain their communities. As the project has evolved, what we have found is that we can support these
individuals and organizations by facilitating conversations, making connections, doing some of the background legwork, and providing support for ongoing projects. So I guess if I had to name a mechanism to maintain and support such communities, it would be the partnership mechanism, which I liken to building Hannah Arendt’s table—defining a third space that exists beyond the university, that incorporates and draws upon the assets of everyday community, providing opportunities for a range of diverse individuals to connect, talk, and imagine solutions. The partnership allows people to come together and brainstorm, and figure out ways to implement solutions, reframe issues, and make connections.

Brown: What are some other specifics that will help me understand the partnership mechanism as it developed between your students, faculty colleagues, and community members?

Shaffer: Although, from the start, we wanted to work together with community members to address community issues, I think it took a while for us to sort that out. The academic model is grounded on scholar experts collecting and examining the data and then solving the problem. It was hard to imagine beyond that model when we first started. But now, as the project has moved forward, it is centered on partnerships, and the individuals and organizations in the three communities are key to those partnerships.

In Hamilton, we began by building on the relationships Professor Shelly Bromberg had developed with the Latino community. Shelly introduced students to Lourdes Leon, owner of Taqueria Mercado. Leon connected students with some of her Latino employees who were interested in working on their English. Leon offered the use of her bakery kitchen and invited the students to come one afternoon a week to help teach English. Students have developed what they call a language exchange, where individual students partner with an employee and meet once a week at the designated time to practice English and Spanish. With the help of a new community partner, Pastor Josh Colon, the language exchange has now expanded to two additional sites: Princeton Pike Church and a local nonprofit in Hamilton.

In rural Butler county, students are partnering with the Miami Oxford Organic Network (MOON) Co-op and the Miami Oxford Organic Network chapter of the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) to help support and build a local-food economy in the region. They are interviewing farmers and local restaurants to create a local-food guide. They have organized a local-food dinner to raise awareness about local-food options, and they helped organize and administer the Fall Harvest MOON Festival.
In OTR, students are partnering with a range of organizations. One student is working with Over-the-Rhine Community Housing to set up Choices Café to provide a positive and safe environment for community members, tenants, and volunteers to meet and build community. Another student is partnering with the Over-the-Rhine Community Housing Network and the Peaslee Neighborhood Center to redesign the entryway and lobby of the Peaslee Center. A third student has partnered with the Cincinnati Civic Garden Center and is working on designing and building an irrigation system for the Eco-Garden on Main St. Two other students are working with the manager of Venice-on-Vine, Regina Saperstein, to design a tax-incentive plan for local businesses that will encourage them to hire workers who have completed the Power Inspires Progress (PIP) training program at Venice-on-Vine.

With all of these projects, the community members have been the driving force. Community partners articulate the goals and students have worked with them to develop and implement projects that will forward those community goals.

**Brown:** Thus far in the “Acting Locally” project, what has surprised you that was not contemplated when the project was originally put together?

**Shaffer:** So many things. What has become so clear in doing this project is how much it challenges the traditional way things are set up within the university; not only the way knowledge is conceptualized, produced, and disseminated, but also the way faculty think about teaching and the way students think about learning. If I had to choose the top two things, I would say, first, that I had no idea how transformational this kind of experience would be for students. In the past, I have seen students get inspired about ideas, but I don’t think I have ever seen this level of empowerment. During the course of the project, which at this point is about three-quarters of the way through, I have watched strong students evolve into inspirational leaders, and I have seen timid students gain a level of self-confidence and commitment that is immeasurable.

Second, I would have to say that I have been surprised at how constraining the traditional structures of knowledge production at the university are. Community-based work is inherently messy and sometimes
nonlinear and irrational. The three-credit-hour framework, separate disciplines, and traditional models of scholarship don’t translate very easily into this real and messy world. Often times, it seemed easier to fall back into the predictability of one-hour class meetings and five-page papers and/or traditional academic research and article writing. Community-based projects take a lot of extra work on the part of faculty, students, and community partners. The only way this project has been possible is through the extreme generosity of the Provost’s office at Miami University, in particular the support and vision of Vice Provost John Skillings, and the funding and support from the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute. It would be nice if the institution supported this kind of work more as the norm rather than the exception.

**Brown:** Thank you, Marguerite.

**Shaffer:** Thank you, David, for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts.
An Interview with Lourdes Leon

Brown: Please tell me how you got involved with Professor Shelly Bromberg and the Wilks Scholars project.

Leon: Well, I had several employees who wanted to learn or improve their English, so I asked Shelly if she had any students who might want to exchange English for Spanish lessons. She sent out a request to the Wilks students and then next thing you know, we had a whole group here. Then, in March 2007, another group of students from the Wilks project wanted to help us create a real positive community clean-up program, so I started working with that group as well.

Brown: In getting involved in a language exchange project, what did you expect your employees and the students to get out of it?

Leon: More than anything, to involve the English-speaking community with the Hispanic community to increase cross-cultural communication in this region where the number of Latinos is increasing. This way, everybody learns about other cultures and other languages and we accept each other more easily.

Brown: How do you think the language exchange program could be changed and improved to make it a better model for forming partnerships in your community?

Leon: I think we need to have a more formal registration process. If the students were to come on the weekends to just talk with employees, they could let them know what is going on, they could interact with them, get their phone numbers, and then tell them when the classes are. Then, they could register them and maybe offer a little dictionary or something that makes the process more legitimate. They could say, “here’s a little dictionary for you, see you on Tuesday for the beginning of classes.” If you register, you feel like it is something worthwhile and not just an informal meeting.

So, for instance, on a Saturday the students could set up a table here that had a sign and information about the Language Exchange—do it maybe every other week.

We need the students to interact more with the employees rather than just coming one day to do the exchange. This community responds better when they get to know you and feel comfortable.

We might also need to do this more often—maybe two days a week—so that the community partners feel more like it is a class.

Brown: Do you feel like an equal partner with the university? Do you think your employees are getting as much out of the project as they are putting in?

Leon: Yes. Because we respect each other, are open to criticism and trying new things, and really enjoy what we are doing together.

As for my employees, yes, this helps them to try to speak English, even if they are still struggling with pronunciation. A lot of times, they feel
comfortable with students, and then when they go out to, for instance, buy a car or get something for the restaurant, they will come back and tell me, with pride, that they were able to do it in English. I think the exchange gives them confidence.

**Brown:** From your perspective as a Latina business owner and community member, what is the current status of Latino immigrants in Hamilton?

**Leon:** Very bad. Recently, the sheriff announced that he had 287(g) powers. The 287(g) is a subset of immigration enforcement that gives state or local law enforcement certain limited immigration power. In the case of the sheriff, his 287(g) will allow him to fill out immigration paperwork he previously could not. My sons said we should protest that and I asked them, “Why? They are not going to listen to us.” I am so tired of this uncertain future; we don’t know how bad it is going to get, even for businesses. Because Latinos are being targeted, they are moving out and not coming here, and we just don’t know what is going to happen. My business, because it is focused on the Latino community, cannot survive without community.

**Brown:** Could you tell me more about why this is happening? Why this sheriff?

**Leon:** The Latino population in this area is relatively new, growing in maybe the last ten years. So, a lot of people here have never seen a Latino. The sheriff is playing on their fears and ignorance to advance his career.

**Brown:** And so . . .

**Leon:** Well, that’s a whole book because he wants to “clean up” his county of Latinos. We keep asking about how you can identify someone who is undocumented. We know, from who is being picked up for even minor violations, that he is targeting Latinos, and in particular, people from Mexico and Central America, because his idea of Latino does not include Afro Latinos or those from a European background. He thinks all Latinos are drug dealers, child abusers, and criminals. Of course, there are bad people in every community, but there are many more good people. He even has on his web site, from when he went to the Mexico/Texas border, that everyone who crosses from Mexico is a criminal. He needs to learn that there are a lot of good people crossing for good reasons.

**Brown:** Could you tell me something about your growing up in Chicago and its impact on what you have pursued since then?

**Leon:** Triton College offered ESL in different parts of the community where they were located. They were in Melrose Park, a Western suburb of Chicago. They had a Lutheran school that was a regular school, but in the evenings they had an ESL program for the community.

It was amazing to find a university so interested in the non-English speaking community that had developed those programs back in the early 1980s. Here, meanwhile, there are no such partnerships between the
universities and Latino community, at least not to the extent that we had in Chicago. They had their own office right in the center of the Latino community where you could take a placement test and start studying English. It was interesting that the surrounding communities were not very happy about having the Latinos in that area at the time, but they still had the school and the English programs. But maybe, thanks to the college, we got a chance to establish ourselves and our community.

So I am hoping that we can do something like that here with Miami or some other university.

Brown: Thank you, Lourdes.
HIGHER EDUCATION AS A DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT?

David Mathews

As readers of this publication know, the *Higher Education Exchange* shares what the Kettering Foundation is learning about democracy with institutions of higher education. The foundation has studied the place of higher education in our democracy for some time. This article is the result of a yearlong review of what it is learning. The foundation studies democracy, not higher education *per se*, and we do that because institutions of higher learning have been integral to democratic movements in America. In fact, these institutions were themselves movements. Being integral to democracy has given colleges and universities much of their identity and mission.

There are indications today that this democratic mission is not as central as it has been. Many now think of the role of colleges and universities as preparing individuals for jobs. That is certainly important. But, as a result, there is a tendency to see academic institutions as simply part of a knowledge industry that is tied to the economy. This perception, however unintentional, may be undercutting higher education’s claim to broad public tax support. The reasoning is that because the benefits of an undergraduate education go directly to individuals and enable them to get good jobs, they should pay the costs themselves. And students are doing that increasingly through higher tuition payments. Derek Bok lamented in 2003 that the rationale for public support was disappearing because “faculties currently display scant interest in preparing undergraduates to be democratic citizens, a task once regarded as the principal purpose of a liberal education.”

This change in mission or purpose results from a weakening of higher education’s sense of being a movement, which came from being part of the country’s ongoing struggle to realize the promise of democracy. Democracy is not just a system of representative governments created by contested elections. It is a way of life as well as a way of government, a way of life that reflects cherished values like freedom and justice. Those are the kinds of values that inspire movements.

Past issues of the *Exchange* have recalled how colleges and universities have been part of major democratic movements since the Revolution. For example, a 1998 article by Claire Snyder-Hall described how academic institutions that were swept up by Revolutionary fervor reflected the values of democracy by teaching students to exercise their own judgment instead of
just immersing themselves uncritically in the “great truths” of the dominant canons. Democratic ideals influenced what it meant to be educated.

Thomas Jefferson’s generation created state universities, most notably the University of Virginia, to prepare leaders for a new democracy. Scott Peters was interviewed in HEX about the founding of land-grant institutions as part of a movement to place more control in the hands of farmers and industrial workers. Scott noted that this movement resulted in “an expansion of the curriculum beyond training for the elite professions by adding fields of study related to the gritty, everyday work of ordinary people.” Democratic initiatives to bring excluded populations into full citizenship used higher education as a vehicle. The results were colleges for women, African Americans, and Native Americans. After World War II, integrating veterans into peacetime America spawned the junior or community college movement, aptly called “democracy’s colleges.” The point is that, in all of these cases, academic institutions derived their missions from external, political forces.

Concern about losing the identity that comes from being part of a democratic movement is not new. Almost 40 years ago, a 1976 report on an Airlie Conference sponsored by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare quoted Earl Cheit, a business school dean at UC Berkeley. He warned “review procedures, regulation, litigation now command so much attention from college and university officials, it is easy to forget that for most of its history higher education in the U.S. was a movement, not a bureaucracy.” More recently, the foundation has heard college and university presidents complain that their jobs are turning them into bureaucrats and beggars rather than educational leaders. They warm to the idea that higher education should regain its identity as a movement. In some recent citizen forums on the mission of academic institutions, little was said about public purpose. This erosion has been going on slowly and may be gaining momentum. Serious efforts to “defund” colleges and universities are underway and higher education has become an attractive target for politicians. And the same loss of public confidence that afflicts all major institutions now touches academic institutions.

In response, some institutions are emphasizing public service and relevant research. Public engagement efforts on most every campus reach out to citizens. That’s encouraging. But having a public role isn’t the same as being part of a democratic movement. And institutions can’t give themselves a democratic mandate. It has to be given to the institutions by the people.

Of course, institutions may claim to serve democracy just by being. (I once heard a university president say just that.) But that is based on a very loose definition of democracy. Happily, some institutions are considering
developing a more rigorous definition, as may be the case for the community colleges participating in the Democracy Commitment.

In the Airlie Conference mentioned earlier, Virginia Smith, Director of HEW’s Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, made a crucial distinction that reflects a more rigorous understanding of democracy and a democratic mandate. She said, “No institution that I know of has been able to revitalize itself from within. No institution has been able to change its structure totally from a force that developed within its own structure. If that is the case then . . . what is necessary in order to bring about changes in our higher education institutions is not to make them . . . more responsive to the outside but to make them more receptive to interaction with forces outside the institution [emphasis added].” Her comment suggested that public legitimacy can’t come solely from public service alone, however beneficial it may be. Legitimacy can only come from a different way of interacting with the public; that is, from a different relationship with a democratic citizenry.

What Virginia said poses a challenge for the future of higher education. Her insight would take colleges and universities beyond serving the public to a different way of interacting with the citizenry. And that interaction could revitalize both higher education’s sense of a democratic mission and the public’s understanding of the purposes of higher learning. The key is how, in its interaction with the public, academe comes to see citizens. The way citizens are seen is the way democracy is understood.

A democratic citizenry is more than an electorate, more than consumers of services, more than beneficiaries of expertise and professionals’ skills. In fact, a democratic citizenry is more than a “thing” or object; it is a dynamic of people engaging one another in the work citizens must do for democracy to live up to its potential. My argument, in brief, is that, with all the effort now going into public engagement, some of it needs to be directed to engaging citizens engaging one another. Many engagement efforts are designed to seize people’s attention and support, somewhat like grabbing an object such as a light bulb. What I am proposing is like plugging into the electricity, the dynamics of citizens engaging citizens.

Given that the erosion of a democratic mission has been going on for decades, why hasn’t something been done to counter it? Could it have something to do with the tendency of people in higher education to talk mainly to other people in higher education about higher education? That conversation is certainly appropriate, yet it won’t engage a democratic public. I think that Virginia Smith was right when she told Airlie participants that academic institutions couldn’t revitalize themselves from within. Virginia’s distinction between being responsive to public needs and being open to interacting
with the citizenry is a powerful insight. Most colleges and universities today are trying to listen to the public, particularly in communities, and to meet people’s needs as they define them. Yet Virginia was arguing for something more; she was suggesting that a different kind of relationship with the public is required.

There is now a potential for development of such a relationship in the deliberative public forums being sponsored by the American Commonwealth Partnership. These forums, if they continue, can build the kind of relationships that allow colleges and universities to better align their missions with citizens and their work. These forums should be held off campus, not just on, and be conducted from the public’s perspectives rather than higher education’s. Citizens can start with their concerns and what they could do to solve them. Then, from that point of view, citizens and educators can decide what role academic institutions should play. This way, the public mission of colleges and universities would be derived from the public, as it has been historically.

There are any number of town-gown issues for colleges and universities to address with citizens: economic development and environmental protection, good health care without constantly escalating costs, improved race relations. The list goes on. I wouldn’t expect these deliberations to produce a new Magna Carta for higher education; yet they could continuously link the work of academia with public purposes. Over time, they could forge a new way for higher education to respond to a democratic citizenry. That should help strengthen a sense of democratic purposefulness in academic institutions.

Deliberation is making decisions about the work citizens must do, and knowing what this work is has implications for how colleges and universities do their work. The two ways of working are different, yet they can and should complement one another. One of the clearest examples of this complementary alignment comes from another institution, the press. The work of citizens involves “naming” or identifying the problems that need solutions. The media also names problems every day. Misalignment occurs because the names citizens use reflect what is deeply valuable to people, what affects them and their families. But the names the media uses are more likely to reflect the names experts and politicians use. Each way of naming problems is valid. Yet they don’t match. For a better alignment, news organizations could incorporate the names citizens use in their coverage. That’s what I mean by alignment.

How institutions see citizens is crucial. Their understanding of citizens is their understanding of democracy. Colleges and universities, because they are providers, tend to see citizens as those to be acted upon. However, citizens are
the primary actors in a strong democracy, not primarily the objects of the actions of others. If citizens are the needy or the uninformed, institutions know what they can do. Yet, institutions and professionals have difficulty seeing how what they do fits into the world of citizens as actors. So it is difficult for them and professionals to see this world because what they do doesn’t necessarily fit. This makes alignment unlikely. Unfortunately, our research shows that the work that most institutions do is not well aligned with what citizens do. (This research is reported in Ships Passing in the Night?, a foundation publication.)

Citizens can be defined simply as people working with other people to solve their common problems. They are people from different walks of life who come together, despite their differences, to rebuild their communities after a natural or human disaster. They are the people one newsmagazine described as those who “fix things”; they are problem solvers. Harry Boyte was cited in a 2012 issue of HEX as describing citizens as producers more than consumers. And their expertise is in building networks of people who get their hands dirty in the civic work of everyday life. All of these people are trying to have a stronger hand in shaping their future. Some would say these are quintessentially democratic citizens. That is why I believe that the question of what colleges and universities do routinely that can align productively with what citizens do in their work is so important.

The question of what blocks alignment isn’t easy to answer. The answer certainly isn’t that academics don’t care about citizens. Most of them act as citizens every day. Academic institutions, however, with the exception of the humanities, are designed to deal with concrete problems that show themselves with discernable evidence. These problems can be remedied with professional expertise. And the impact of the remedies can be measured.

The problems that citizens and communities work to solve, on the other hand, have been aptly described as “wicked,” meaning that they are pervasive and persistent because they are systemic. Wicked problems come from many sources throughout a community; so many so that it is difficult to say what the problem really is. Take hard-core poverty, for example. Is it a problem of discrimination, a failure of the educational system, the nature of the economic system, or the culture? Also, because these wicked problems have multiple sources in every sector of the community, everyone has to be involved in solving them. Furthermore, these problems are characterized by intangibles, like perceptions or mindsets, and are accompanied by strong emotions.

Wicked problems also raise questions about what should be done. What is the right thing to do? There aren’t any expert answers to such questions. They require the exercise of public judgment. And exercising that judgment
or deliberating is part of the work citizens have to do in order to combat wicked problems.

The challenge for future issues of the Exchange is not only to make the work of a democratic citizenry more visible but also to show how academic institutions can fit into this work—without trying to make the work of citizens match the way academic institutions work. Past issues have started in this direction by looking into the potential in aligning academic ways of knowing with public ways of knowing. Whether that kind of alignment happens or not, one thing is clear—we must not lose the opportunities created by those institutions that are now looking outward. They can go beyond public service to democratic engagement. And doing that will go a long way toward recovering their historic role as part of a democratic movement.
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