

A
DIFFERENT
KIND OF
POLITICS

READINGS ON THE ROLE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY

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Introductory
Essay:
Reimagining
the Civic
Imperative of
Higher Education

IMAGINE A UNIVERSITY that has deliberately and persistently built meaningful relationships with members of its wider community—neighborhood groups, community-based organizations, local citizens, nonprofits, and governmental agencies. Imagine that at this university, in their first-year, students begin to see how a variety of disciplinary lenses can be employed to understand important issues facing their institution, the local area, and larger society. In subsequent years of study, students come to understand the various policy levers by which participatory democratic change can be enacted—on campus and off. Students would learn the precepts of democratic deliberation and be invited to witness and later participate in various forums in which

local, national, and global issues are debated and discussed. Soon, many students at this institution know more about the democratic processes of the local area than they would about their own hometowns. Further, community concerns that emerge from various deliberative forums would inform the development of service-learning projects and the service-learning experiences would lead to further debate and discussion about how to make additional progress. Research groups that draw on the expertise of various disciplines and of community members who are well versed in the local context would collaborate to develop a richer understanding of the issues and what might be done to improve the situation. The institution also would support research on the impact of various efforts.

This is the rich, formative educational experience that can be envisioned if the perspectives and practices articulated in the body of works published by the Kettering Foundation (and reviewed here) are integrated into college and university efforts to educate students for active citizenship. In doing so, the civic engagement movement in higher education might find an antidote to its distressingly apolitical character.

Success in such a venture will be aided by an understanding of the history and ongoing challenges of the civic engagement movement in higher education and the imperative to build on progress to date. It will also require serious attention to the reasons for young people's distaste for current political practices and the opportunities this provides to introduce them to an alternative set of practices rooted in the belief that politics need not be focused on divisive partisan politics and "sound bite" campaigns but rather myriad opportunities for citizens in all spheres to produce public goods.

Over the past two decades, American higher education has engaged in considerable soul-searching about its core purposes, particularly its responsibility to our democracy. The mission statements of many institutions assert that higher education ought to embrace the challenge of preparing an

enlightened citizenry.⁷ But how might colleges and universities go about promoting civic and political consciousness and what are the civic roles of the institutions themselves? Further, if civic engagement is such important work, why isn't more of it occurring? Several books and reports recently published with the support of the Kettering Foundation offer an expansive view of the current civic landscape and examine both theoretically and empirically the rich possibilities for fostering democratic deliberation and engagement at our institutions of higher learning and in our communities.

The impetus for recent efforts to advance the civic purposes of colleges and universities stems from several sources. By the 1990s, there were pervasive concerns over a withering of the common life, which Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam brilliantly captured in his image of Americans "bowling alone."⁸ Political engagement sharply declined and mistrust in government grew. A rising chorus of critics argued that colleges and universities had become self-absorbed (and self-serving) Ivory Towers, disconnected from and fundamentally disinterested in pressing societal problems. Then-president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest Boyer, summed up the situation by saying, "I have this growing conviction that what is needed [for higher education] is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life."⁹

This state of affairs prompted hundreds and finally tens of thousands of individuals to act, resulting in the emergence of a far-reaching civic engagement movement.¹⁰ The dozens of new networks and organizations that formed resulted in the creation of Campus Compact. This presidential coalition dedicated to promoting civic and community engagement has grown from 3 members in 1985 to more than 1,200 in 2008, nearly a quarter of all colleges and universities.

⁷Christopher Morphew and Matthew Hartley, "Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric across Institutional Type," *Journal of Higher Education*, 77, no. 3 (2006): 456-471.

⁸Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (2006): 65-78.

⁹Ernest Boyer, "Creating the New American College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 9, 1994).

¹⁰Matthew Hartley and Elizabeth Hollander, "The Elusive Ideal: Civic Learning and Higher Education," in *Institutions of Democracy: The Public Schools*, eds. S. Fuhrman and M. Lazerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 252-276.

The focus of these efforts has evolved over time. Early civic engagement initiatives focused solely on encouraging students to become involved in the community through volunteerism or “public service,” as it tended to be called. Later, in the 1990s, there were efforts to also link community-based activities with the curriculum through service learning. Many colleges and universities created centers for community partnership in order to work collaboratively with local agencies and groups and actively promote the revitalization of distressed communities. Despite this important work, a number of critics raised concerns about limitations of many service-focused efforts. Nary a service-learning conference convened without bemoaning the need to move beyond “service-learning 101” and grapple with their deep systemic roots. In 1999, a seminal conference cosponsored by the American Council on Education and Campus Compact led to the drafting of the Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, which was signed by more than 500 college and university presidents. The document pointedly concludes that, “This service is not leading students to embrace the duties of active citizenship and civic participation. . . . We must teach the skills and values of democracy.” In sum, what had emerged was an apolitical civic engagement.

One of the great champions of efforts to connect these efforts to democratic goals has been the Kettering Foundation. The *Higher Education Exchange (HEX)*, established in 1994, has been an important venue for scholars and practitioners to debate and discuss the democratic purposes of higher education. The legacy of this journal is reflected in the thoughtful and thought-provoking book *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey*, edited by David Brown and Deborah Witte. This volume, the product of two years of workshops that drew together a group of contributors to *HEX*, offers clearheaded acknowledgement of the challenges attendant to this work. The American democracy faces what Kettering president David Mathews aptly characterizes as “megachallenges.”

If America’s great democratic experiment is not faltering, it is at least in need of reinvigation. One of the most striking indicators is the political disengagement of America’s youth and their disaffection with the political process. Trend data from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA,

which surveys several hundred thousand students annually, shows the percentage of incoming freshmen who agreed that it is “important for me to keep up to date with political affairs” declining from around 60 percent in 1966 to 28 percent by 2000. The report from Abby Kiesa and colleagues at the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), *Millennials Talk Politics* offers important insights into the minds of 18- to 25-year-olds. At a time when volunteerism and local involvement has increased, students have grown increasingly ambivalent about politics. They see politics as dominated by polarized debate, with little room for compromise and nuance. They dislike “spin” and find it hard to imagine how to access a political system dominated by “big money.” Politics is seen as “slow moving, as well as messy and hard to understand (23). Politicians are viewed as distant from the problems of their constituents. Voting is not considered as an effective way to bring about change—organized groups of people are. Students seek opportunities for open conversations about important issues that can help them decide their own point of view. But they often feel inundated by information, especially in the age of the inexhaustible Internet opportunities, and are uncertain what information to trust. The Kiesa study also shows that opportunities for civic engagement differ widely, depending upon the type of college. Underresourced colleges were much less likely to provide civic engagement opportunities for students.

Despite such concerns, many students are interested in finding ways to be involved, and this Millennial generation did participate in the 2004 national election which showed an 11 percent uptick in youth voting, the largest since 1992. Given pervasive discontent with the political system and uneven opportunities for civic engagement, Peter Levine, in *Agent of Democracy*, observes that “the spike in youth voting in 1992 gave way to a substantial turnout decline in 1996 and 2000. However, the rate of student volunteering increased just as turnout fell” (18). Surveys of participants in 47 focus groups found that most (64 percent) felt they could make some or a great deal of difference in their communities while nearly the same proportion (60 percent) indicated that the political system in the country is not responsive to the genuine needs of the public. How, then, can the democratic fires of our democracy be rekindled?

The Contested Civic Purposes of American Higher Education

Although the civic purposes of schooling have been widely touted (one can scarcely find a college mission statement or commencement address that doesn't espouse service to society and in many cases the fostering of an enlightened citizenry), civic language has often outstripped meaningful action. Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that our institutions of higher learning have increasingly found themselves faced with competing commitments. A recent Public Agenda study of parents' attitudes, *Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*, shows that many see college as "the only path to a good job," although many are worried about its availability because of cost" (2-3). It's no small wonder that professional majors outstrip liberal arts graduates at most colleges and universities. In the rush to establish credentials, other historical purposes of higher education, including civic engagement, have been lost in the shuffle. Increasingly, a college education has come to be seen as a private good—something individuals purchase to benefit themselves.

The follow-up study, *I'm Just Not That Into Politics: Public and Leadership Views on Higher Education and Civic Engagement*, on attitudes toward the purposes of college reinforces this view that college's primary role is to prepare students for the labor force. Education for civic engagement is viewed as a very low priority. This state of affairs has distorted the values and altered the behaviors of these institutions. Many institutions find themselves competing for students by engaging in a war of ever-increasing amenities. One senior admissions officer recently ruefully described being asked by a prospective student how tall the campus' climbing wall was. The punch line? The university rests at the foot of the Rockies. While a roommate dispute might be creatively conceived as an occasion to practicing the art of living in community, it can be a tough sell. In an essay in *Agent of Democracy*, Adam Weinberg, then Colgate University's Dean of the College explains: "A parent will call us because their son/daughter is being kept up by a roommate. We explain that this is a great opportunity for their son/daughter to learn how to get along with people and to negotiate space—a fundamental skill of democracy. A parent will respond by saying that they don't care about civic skills, they sent their child to college to get good grades so they can get a good job" (109).

Apathy toward a civic agenda is not just the result of external pressures; resistance can be found within the academy as well. The German research university model which gained ascendancy over the past century and a half has produced a system that rewards faculty members who publish in prestigious disciplinary journals rather than individuals who apply their scholarly gifts in partnership with community members in order to resolve pressing problems, what Ernest Boyer called the “scholarship of engagement.”¹¹ The contributors to *Agent of Democracy* underscore the ways in which prevailing academic norms have become inimical to a civic imperative. Claire Snyder reminds us that although the American Social Science Association was founded as an agent of societal change, this transformational agenda quickly ran afoul of the desire to assert scientific “objectivity” and it became unworkable as broad areas of study fragmented into specializations such as sociology, political science, economics (63). This has had far-reaching effects. Even at liberal arts institutions that are dedicated to forming the minds and hearts of students, disciplinary norms prevail. As Weinberg observes, “Too many faculty have professionalized themselves. They see themselves as a narrow type of scientist. . . . Great civic education comes from faculty who think about themselves, their work, and their teaching in much more craftlike ways” (114). Political scientist and organizer Harry Boyte describes the “growing detachment of academia from public life” (84). He argues that public engagement offers an antidote for the tendency towards detached and all-too-neat abstract reasoning. “Public work politics is urgently needed to complicate every kind of abstract, categorical, idealized mode of thought. Such politics is rooted in the gritty soil of human plurality” (87). In sum, engagement is not only good for society; it adds deeper dimensions of analysis and understanding to academic work.

But such work remains marginal on many campuses. Conveying the findings of a focus group of engaged faculty at a land-grant university, Scott Peters notes that “many of them claimed that the work they do is not valued, supported, or pursued by most of their academic peers” (145). The approach flies in the face of accepted standards. A faculty member at another land-grant university observed: “I am always engaged in an internal dialog

¹¹ Ernest Boyer, “The Scholarship of Engagement,” *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 1 (1996).

in meetings like this one between what I hear around the table and what I know the dominant university culture is asking: where's the beef in validated research results?" (159-159). The civic engagement movement clearly faces some prodigious ideological barriers within the academy.

The external environment has also conspired to apoliticize the academy. Claire Snyder notes that the ascendancy of political liberalism has had a deleterious effect on our political system. In stark contrast to the individual activism espoused by civic republicanism "the liberal citizen has individual rights but few duties" (53). Further, many citizens (including young people) have concluded that powerful interest groups now dominate the political process, resulting in what Crenson and Ginsberg call a "downsizing of democracy."¹²

Finding a Way Forward

Despite the considerable challenges outlined above, these readings offer a measure of hope. They describe a variety of strategies that colleges and universities have enacted in order to advance their democratic purposes. The use of democratic dialogue as a promising practice for problem solving is the one that is most comprehensively addressed in these readings and one Kettering has played a leading role in promoting.

One of the richest examples comes from Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan of Wake Forest University. Harriger and McMillan detail the results of a four-year experiment with deliberative dialogue in their book *Speaking of Politics*. The authors recruited a group of 30 students who enrolled in 2 sections of a first-year seminar entitled "Deliberative Democracy." The student group also helped organize events promoting democratic dialogue on campus and in the community. The book describes how the project unfolded over the course of four years and measures the impact on the students involved, as well as the impact on students much less involved, and those not at all involved. The impacts on these 30 students were significant: it increased their understanding of politics, their sense of agency, their sense of responsibilities as citizens and it gave them skills useful to them as citizens

¹²Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

and in their personal lives. There is even evidence that students who merely participated in one deliberation gained from the experience.

One of the benefits of this volume is that it honestly describes some of the challenges attendant to this work. For example, deliberations held in the community posed the most difficulty for students. Faculty struggled with how much guidance to give them. Also, although these faculty members aimed to create a diverse cohort of students, they were somewhat impeded by a predominantly wealthy and white student body. What makes this account so interesting and useful, however, is that Harriger and McMillan approach the initiative as an experiment and a work in progress. They recognize that faculty need to embrace new approaches to their work. They understand that “stronger, more eloquent, better informed community members will unfairly influence weaker participants” (23). Or, as Mary Stanley puts it in her critique of deliberation in *Agent of Democracy*, too great an insistence on “civility” can end up silencing voices deemed “disruptive” (31).

Despite such misgivings, the findings of the study suggest that designing learning experiences that emphasize democratic dispositions and behaviors can have a powerful effect on the experience of undergraduates. The experiment also is a promising antidote to the problem expressed in the *Millennials Talk Politics* report: that students find it hard to be informed about public issues and to sort through information conveyed through the popular media, often with a contentious partisan bent (5).

Deliberation & the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus, and the Community, edited by John Dedrick, Laura Grattan, and Harris Dienstfrey, ably describes the use of deliberation in a variety of contexts—at different kinds of institutions and in various academic programs. This volume demonstrates the rich possibilities of inviting students to engage in this work by grappling with pressing societal issues in the context of their academic experience. In some powerful examples, deliberation is coupled with course-based service learning. David Cooper at Michigan State University describes how the combination of service, community-based research and issue framing and dialogue facilitation in humanities classes at all levels can help deepen students’ connections to the community and “move them from an awareness of issues into pragmatic problem-solving strategies” (137). Exposing students to deliberation also has the advantage of intro-

ducing them to a citizen-based movement to reclaim democratic life that is widespread at the local level but not generally recognized in national politics. As Dudley and Morse from Virginia Tech, tell us “the current environment of public service demands practitioners who work collaboratively with citizens for the public good” (165). Allison Crawford, a Wake Forest political science major, who was a Democracy Fellow, clearly articulates the impact of using her deliberative skills as part of a service-learning course. In working with a local community organization to organize dialogues about the local school system, she learned that the skills she had acquired could translate into meaningful solutions for real people (277-278).

Kettering’s research has also been useful in rethinking the use of service-learning experiences to instill in students a sense of personal efficacy—“I can make a difference in my community.” As Peter Levine notes in his essay in *Agent of Democracy*, the best examples of service learning are “true collaborations among students, professors, and community members; they have a political dimension (that is, they organize people to tackle fundamental problems collectively); they combine deliberation with concrete action; and they are connected to [teaching and learning outcomes]” (21). Of course, service-learning efforts often fall short of this ideal. This fact has tended to produce some rather unfortunate misconceptions regarding this useful pedagogy, some of which are reflected in these readings. Service learning is conflated with volunteerism or with well-meaning but ultimately palliative service, or with service *to* communities, rather than capacity building *with* communities. Given the burgeoning literature on service learning, which describes its applicability in addressing a variety of learning outcomes, including civic development, and its efficacy as a strategy for building long-term democratic partnerships between universities and communities, it is a shame that its potential is not explored in greater detail in these readings.

Looking Forward

What does the future hold? This is a time of great opportunity. As Peter Levine notes, the current generation of Millennials offers hope: “The early signs ... suggest a strong commitment to volunteer service matched by an increased interest in formal politics.” Forty-seven percent of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds voted in 2004 (27). The Barack Obama presidential campaign

shows how effectively young people can be mobilized by a message of constructive change, building across our differences, and pursuing nonconflict, nonideological approaches to solving real problems. This message has been combined with lots of opportunities for engagement through technological social networking mechanisms, which are widely used by young people. It will be important to nurture this rise in idealism and optimism.

To accomplish this, higher education needs to reclaim and reassert the democratic purposes of their civic mission and be clear about their goals. Penn State hosted two dozen colleagues in 2004 for a National Public Scholarship Conversation. However, Jeremy Cohen remarks: “Missing ... was a sustained consideration of democracy itself—either what it is or how to practice it” (160). Inherent in most of the Kettering material is a view of the democracy that is rooted in a Deweyan ideal of citizens practicing democracy in their neighborly communities through discussion and action. This view implies that the central task of teaching civics is not simply to understand how a bill becomes a law or to appreciate the responsibilities of the three branches of government but to help students understand how to create things of public value, whether on campus or off. This requires the development of civic skills, such as an ability to listen carefully to citizens as well as experts, to formulate and articulate a well-founded opinion or idea, and to weigh various policy alternatives. But to build these skills we need to contemplate an academy in which students are empowered (intellectually and practically) to challenge the status quo, including confronting authorities that reside on their own campus, an outcome that is rarely welcomed by administrators.

This view of democracy would also require a shift in faculty roles from acting as objective pundits or experts able to provide technical solutions to problems, to intellectuals who catalyze debate, develop relationships among diverse constituencies, act as coaches and are, themselves, part of the process of reinvigorating the public square. This is contrary to much of what occurs on many of our campuses today. As Scott Peters observes regarding land-grant institutions, “Instead of using a political language of public relationships ... the prevailing view employs a mechanical language of responsive public service that focuses on the provision of technical solutions” (124).

A democratic civic engagement would also have to take the role of the community much more seriously. Underlying the perspective represented

by the writers reviewed here is a common belief that there is knowledge to be gained from the community as well as from the academy. Democracy is strengthened when each can learn from the other and apply both kinds of knowledge to seeking solutions to our most pressing problems. But truly reciprocal partnerships are difficult to establish. Many are, in the words of Mathews, a problematic “drop-in, drop-out, observe and advise relationship” (222). All of it, it is safe to say, is a “hard sell” for many faculty trained in traditional disciplines that stress expertise, privileges “objective, scientific” research and has as its highest value, replication of the next generation of scholars. To make things more difficult, community members may be reticent about establishing relationships where there has been a history of Ivory Tower aloofness, especially when it has been coupled with institutional expansion.

What we see in these readings, and in general in the field, are a host of worthy civic engagement activities. What is conspicuously absent is the purposeful, strategic integration of these efforts. What is required now are more comprehensive and orchestrated approaches to civic engagement that intentionally use a range of strategies in order to make a difference in the lives of students and communities, like the University of Charleston’s efforts to radically redesign its undergraduate curriculum using many active learning approaches, including dialogue, as described by Douglas Walters in *Deliberation & the Work of Higher Education* (193-208). As envisioned at the outset of this essay, powerful civic education will be achieved when student experiences in and out of the classroom are consciously designed to provide myriad, different, but reinforcing, opportunities to gain civic knowledge and skills, including skills for “political” participation.

There is another element of civic engagement efforts that is too often missing. We live in a time when the “neighborly community” is increasingly international, as well as local, and a time when concepts of democracy are deeply challenged. Mary Stanley reminds us that the academy has an important role to play in bringing new ways of looking at “big issues” in our society. Stanley points out that all work, including “public work,” is being transformed by a dedication to global efficiency, which trumps all other values. She calls for a “loud and proud” critical examination of practices and assumptions that support neoliberal globalization as a natural process.

Stanley's essay reminds us how little we ask students (and ourselves) to confront and challenge the status quo and how infrequently there are conversations in the civic engagement movement about deeply troubling issues like the Iraq war and the impact the "war on terror" is having on our democratic institutions both economically and constitutionally. One notable exception here is noted in Cohen's essay in *Agent of Democracy* in which his use of the war and its usurpation of constitutional rights as an example of why higher education must teach students about the theory and practice of democratic citizenship to fulfill the role posited by James Madison: to "throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty and dangerous encroachments on the public liberty" (154). Indeed, Cohen's mention is noteworthy in being the singular discussion in all of these writings about issues of basic democratic freedoms, such as *habeas corpus*, freedom of speech, and rights to privacy, which have been influenced and even abrogated during this time of war.

In fact a number of campuses have begun focusing attention on the larger sociopolitical context in which these issues have emerged. The Ford Foundation president, Susan Berresford, along with 15 college presidents stated, in 2005 that they were "deeply troubled by reports of growing religious intolerance and of increasing restrictions on academic freedom on college and university campuses. In the wake of 9/11 and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, the tone of academic debate has become increasingly polarized, and, in some cases, we see attempts to silence individuals, faculty and students alike, with controversial views. We believe that these problems are symptoms of the nation's larger and more complex challenge of sustaining informed political and civic discourse."¹³ The Ford Foundation issued a request for proposal to colleges to undertake "Difficult Dialogues" on their campuses, and 675 responded. (There were only 27 grants available.) Some of the campuses that received grants proceeded to organize dialogues that involved community members as well as students, once again reinforcing the potential power of campus/community deliberation to address even our

¹³ Susan Berresford, "Difficult Dialogues: Promoting Pluralism and Academic Freedom on Campus, a Letter from Higher Education Leaders and Susan Berresford to College and University Presidents" (New York: Ford Foundation, March 31, 2005).

most complicated pressing national and international issues with rigor not rancor.

Combining our best strategies for preparing our students for their role in a 21st-century democracy in a shrinking world is a complicated and pressing task, and we are still learning how to do it well. Toni Morrison reminds us how much is at stake if we do not find a way a way to persevere: “If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.”¹⁴

Elizabeth Hollander
Tufts University

Matthew Hartley
University of Pennsylvania

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, “How Can Values Be Taught in the University?” lecture delivered at the Center for Human Values, Princeton University (Princeton, NJ: April 27, 2000), found online at <http://www.umich.edu/mqr/morrison.hum>, accessed 3/5/2008.