

A
DIFFERENT
KIND OF
POLITICS

READINGS ON THE ROLE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY

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PREFACE

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, the Kettering Foundation and its network of researchers have produced a large body of work on higher education and its democratic role. This volume brings these works together into a single publication to ask how the multiple lines of research reflect a coherent approach to democratic politics. What is the common thread that unites Kettering's research in higher education?

The struggle to reclaim the democratic mission of higher education institutions is part of a broader dynamic in contemporary politics, the deceptively simple problem that citizens feel shut out of politics. Lacking control over the problems that confront them, citizens feel frustrated and disconnected from the institutions that have power over their lives. One way to understand this problem is as an imbalance between the organic and the institutional components of democracy (others have described this same imbalance in terms of citizen-centered versus professional politics, or civic agency against technocracy).¹ In institutional approaches to politics, experts assume that complex political problems are largely administrative in nature and name them in technical terms that only they can act upon. Rather than empowering communities to act on their own, institutional approaches treat communities as dependent clients or passive recipients of help from above. Instead of building upon the knowledge of citizens, institutional politics sees experts as the exclusive producers of knowledge, which they disseminate to society. Most important, institutional politics sees experts and professional organizations rather than citizens as the primary actors in solving public problems.

¹Harry Boyte, "Against the Current: Developing the Civic Agency of College Students," *Change* (May-June 2008); Cynthia M. Gibson, "Citizens at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement" (Case Foundation, 2006).

In organic politics, citizens are the primary actors. Citizens are able to understand the problems that they confront and take meaningful action to address them. Although sporadic and individual acts of volunteerism and casual interactions to build social trust may be important supplements to organic politics, they are no substitute for collective action. Professionals can play an important role in organic politics, not as technocrats that solve problems *for* citizens, but rather as civic professionals working *with* citizens in a way that builds upon the knowledge, skills, and power that they bring to democracy. This type of politics can be observed in deliberative forums in which citizens come together to make decisions on public problems, self-organizing social and political networks that are strengthening local communities, and movements to reclaim the civic roots of various professions.

Unfortunately, politics as usual (not to be confused with politics broadly understood) assumes that democracy is exclusively a matter of institutional politics. As Randa Slim notes, the movement for global democracy has become equated with institutional designs, oppositional electoral politics, and technical assistance, rather than habits of citizenship, building civic capacities, and culture change.² Various government and civil society institutions are undergoing a crisis in legitimacy stemming from a lack of connection to organic politics. For example, instead of achieving legitimacy through practices of self-rule that citizens could “own” themselves, in the movement for greater “accountability” we are seeing largely futile attempts to create legitimacy through technical metrics developed and interpreted by experts. Institutions that are charged with important public functions (like the media and philanthropy) often speak of “civic engagement,” but in practice they mean providing services to a needy and passive public or garnering public support for their own preconceived goals. Citizens are reduced to voting and otherwise acting as spectators on the outside of a system that remains obscure and over which they have no power.

With its important social role in educating future generations of citizens and producing cutting-edge knowledge to advance solutions to public problems, higher education is an obvious intervention point for making

²Randa Slim, “Facing the Challenges of Emerging Democracies,” *Kettering Review* vol. 25, no. 1 (2007).

democracy work as it should. As Claire Snyder argues, until the development of the modern research university, education for citizenship was considered *the* mission of colleges and universities in the United States. Congregational colleges, people's colleges, historically black colleges, and the land-grant university movement all saw teaching, research, and service in broadly political terms.³ This political understanding of education extends back to antiquity and the Greek concept of *paideia*.⁴ In contemporary society, higher education also contains exciting examples of organic politics in this tradition, in which young people are learning to act as citizens, and professionals are engaging in self-critique leading to new practices in which citizens are treated as primary political actors. At the same time, however, higher education contains many of the worst examples of technocratic politics, with experts naming problems in technical terms and treating citizens as dependent clients even when intending to serve their interests. As a recent report by Public Agenda shows, civic engagement is simply not high on the agenda of institutional leaders or constituencies in the general public.⁵ Does higher education exacerbate the politics of expertise and further shut citizens out of politics? Or will it return to its democratic mission?

To answer these questions, we have compiled a series of readings, along with reflective interviews conducted by David Brown, on the common themes of the research and its implications for citizen self-rule. The material is drawn primarily from the following recent publications:⁶

- *Speaking of Politics*, by Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan (Kettering Foundation Press, 2007), a monograph on a sustained institutional commitment to infusing education for democratic citizenship throughout a college curriculum and cocurriculum;

³R. Claire Snyder, "Should Higher Education Have a Civic Mission? Historical Reflections," in *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey*, ed. David Brown and Deborah Witte (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2008), 53-75.

⁴Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁵"I'm Just Not That into Politics: Public and Leadership Views on Higher Education and Civic Engagement" (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2007).

⁶Excerpts of previously published material are used with the permission of the authors. To improve readability, some sections have been edited without the use of ellipses and recapitalization at the authors' request.

- *Millennials Talk Politics*, by Abby Kiesa, Alexander P. Orłowski, Peter Levine, Deborah Both, Emily Hoban Kirby, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Karlo Barrios Marcelo (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement [CIRCLE] in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, 2007), on the political attitudes of college students;
- *Voices of Hope* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2007), by Nan Kari and Nan Skelton, the story of the Jane Addams School, a “school for citizenship” that receives support from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship of the University of Minnesota;
- *Deliberation & the Work of Higher Education* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2008), edited by John Dedrick, Laura Grattan, and Harris Dientsfrey, a collection of innovative experiments using deliberation in the civic education of college students;
- *Higher Education Exchange (HEX)*, a journal edited by David W. Brown and Deborah Witte, featuring essays and interviews on the roles of higher education institutions and academic professionals in democracy;
- *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2008), edited by David W. Brown and Deborah Witte, a series of reflective essays on more than a decade of *HEX* research.

Chapter One is an introductory essay by Elizabeth Hollander and Matthew Hartley. They provide an overview of recent Kettering research and its role in responding to apolitical approaches to civic engagement.

Chapter Two brings together a series of projects related to the civic education of college students. According to the *Millennials Talk Politics* report by Abby Kiesa and colleagues, despite a sense of frustration with politics as usual, young people are interested in opportunities for meaningful political participation. Studies by David Cooper and Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, together with a student perspective presented by Allison Crawford, suggest that deliberation offers young people an experience in a different kind of politics, in which they are treated as having a strong sense of civic agency.

Chapter Three explores the role of scholarship in democracy. Knowledge is increasingly central in the global economy, but also ever more specialized and technical in nature, and ever more obscure and inaccessible to citizens. Unfortunately, the dominant approaches to the production and commu-

nication of knowledge in academia are built on theories that emphasize detachment from society, and the reward structures in academia favor these traditional models of expertise. In recent years, new forms of scholarship have emerged that work cooperatively with citizens, simultaneously strengthening democracy and ensuring that scholarly work has greater social relevance. Beginning with Jay Rosen's 1997 essay, the turn toward public forms of scholarship has been a theme for over a decade in the *Higher Education Exchange*. The pieces by Harry Boyte and Scott Peters reflect on this work in light of recent developments in the conflict between technocracy and civic agency.

Chapter Four examines the relationship between higher education institutions and community-based organizations. Higher education institutions sometimes treat communities as spaces for civic agency, but more often they see external stakeholders as needy clients dependent upon expertise for technical assistance. Sean Creighton shows that these efforts look much more like politics as usual when seen from the perspective of the community partners. However, Nan Kari's and Nan Skelton's *Voices of Hope* and David Pelletier's profile tell stories of new institutional structures that contribute to communities' civic capacities and redefine the role of expertise.

Chapter Five addresses the question of who will lead the next generation of civic engagement efforts in higher education. Those who have the strongest sense of civic identity and experience the most intense frustration with their institutions appear to be mostly faculty. The pieces by Bill Doherty and Adam Weinberg give personal accounts of the deepest passions behind faculty engaged in civic work. If higher education is to align itself with democratic politics, the transformation is likely to begin with stories like these.

Finally, David Mathews concludes the book with his reflections on the continuing challenges to reconnecting higher education to organic democracy. Although Mathews sees the work compiled in this volume as part of a growing democratic shift within higher education, he also sees this movement as critically limited. As he argues, the next generation of civic work in higher education will require building new relationships with external practitioners and stakeholders so that the civic engagement of higher education institutions will be relevant to the most urgent needs of communities.

The picture of higher education that emerges is thus highly ambivalent. Politics as usual appears to be the dominant trend within higher education, with a lack of attention to the civic dimensions of undergraduate education, detachment and obscurity in academic scholarship, and dysfunctional relationships between higher education institutions and communities. At the same time, there appears to be a growing sense of crisis within higher education, as well as innovative experiments at the margins to redefine teaching, research, and service. These efforts reflect a different kind of politics, with pedagogies that treat students as active learners and engaged citizens, new forms of professionalism that understand citizens as the primary actors in politics, and institutional efforts to build genuinely democratic relationships with community partners. This narrative, deeply critical of politics as usual, but cautiously optimistic about a different kind of politics, is not, of course, unique to higher education. Civic engagement efforts in higher education reflect a much larger global contest over the meaning of democracy, between democracy defined as the way of life of active citizens engaged in self-rule and democracy defined as an institutional arrangement with citizens playing a secondary role.

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