
INTRODUCTION

“To Serve a Larger Purpose”

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But, at a deeper level, I have this growing conviction that what’s . . . needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the Nation’s life . . . creating a special climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and creatively with each other.

—Ernest L. Boyer, *The Scholarship of Engagement* (1996, pp. 32–33)

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

We conceived of this book with a sense of urgency that has emerged from reflections on civic engagement work in higher education—the current state of which points to fragmentation and drift. Seemingly, civic engagement efforts have not, in large part, fulfilled Ernest Boyer’s call for higher education “to serve a larger purpose” (1996, p. 22). What Boyer was referring to was the democratic purpose of higher education, or what he called its “civic mandate” (1990, p. 16). Here, we are primarily concerned with two related dimensions of this deficit of purpose: first, that the dominant paradigm of civic engagement in higher education does not express or actively seek to fulfill a democratic purpose, and second, that colleges and universities, in the absence of this larger sense of purpose for civic engagement work, have failed to pursue the kind of institutional change needed to realign the central premises and core work of the academy. The focus of this book is the reclamation of the democratic purposes of civic engagement and an examination of the requisite transformation of higher education that would be required to achieve it.

The observation that the civic engagement movement in American higher education is adrift has been advanced by a growing number of civic engagement proponents over the past decade. In 1999, two influential documents pointing to significant challenges facing the movement were published. The “Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities” (Boyte and Hollander 1999) admonished higher education

institutions to reclaim their historic legacy and to again be “filled with the democratic spirit,” a phrase from Harvard’s Charles Eliot. A report from the Kellogg Commission, a group of university presidents, entitled “Returning to Our Roots” (1999) argued that land-grant universities ought to intentionally reclaim their public purposes.

In 2000, the “Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education”—signed by more than 500 college and university presidents—argued that civic engagement had failed to address the political disengagement of America’s youth, pointing out that although volunteerism had increased, political understanding and engagement remained perilously low. Two years later, a report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), representing over 400 public institutions, found that not only was there a lack of definition and clarity regarding civic engagement efforts, but

many universities espouse the importance of public engagement but do little internally to align the institution to support its achievement. The result is that public engagement remains on many campuses very fragile and person-dependent. At most institutions, the idea of public engagement is not so deeply rooted in its culture that its emphasis would continue unabated after the departure of a committed CEO or other academic leader. (p. 8)

This candid report concluded that “there is considerable evidence that deep engagement is rare—there is more smoke than fire, more rhetoric than reality . . . Most [campuses] have some form of community interaction, but in the main it is piecemeal, not systemic, and reflects individual interest rather than institutional commitment” (p. 13).

In 2004, a group of movement leaders met at the Wingspread conference center to discuss the state of civic engagement in higher education (Brukardt et al. 2004). They concluded that while the movement had prompted some change, it had plateaued. Their report, provocatively entitled *Calling the Question*, inquired whether engagement should become a core value of the university of the twenty-first century—that is, a central feature informing the academic mission of higher education in generating and transmitting new knowledge. The report noted that “engagement has not . . . been embraced across disciplines, departments and institutions” (p. ii) and that “the momentum needed for engagement to become fully identified with the mission of higher education” was waning (p. 4). Echoing the concerns from the AASCU study, the Wingspread participants concluded that despite widespread evidence of innovative engagement activities across higher education, “few institutions have made the significant, sustainable, structural reforms that will result in an academic culture that values community engagement as a core function of the institution” (p. 5).

Beyond this troubling emergent consensus, there are important tangible factors that are also cause for concern. While there have been important gains,

the dominant strategies advanced to promote civic engagement have hardly been universally embraced. For example, among Campus Compact members (institutions with a presidential commitment to civic and community engagement) the percentage of students engaging in service (both curricular and cocurricular “service”) hovers a little below one-third (28 percent in 2001 and 32 percent in 2006). The average number of service-learning courses on these campuses (twenty-seven per campus in 2001 and thirty-five in 2006) suggests only a modest influence on the overall curricular offerings. When one considers what proportion of total courses that thirty-five represents, even at small liberal arts colleges, it is a sobering statistic.

The number of institutions committed both rhetorically *and* programmatically to civic engagement is relatively small. Over the first two application cycles (2006 and 2008), 196 campuses have received the elective classification for Community Engagement from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. As Gary Rhoades points out, this classification represents an effort on the part of the Carnegie Foundation “to inscribe in academic structures and in the consciousness of faculty” an emphasis on “the value of the local” (2009, p. 12). Yet the number of Community Engagement–classified campuses represents just over 4 percent of the more than 4,600 higher education institutions (campuses classified by the Carnegie Foundation) in the United States.

Additionally, external support for civic engagement efforts has declined. A number of key foundations that provided support in the 1990s (e.g., Pew, Ford, Kellogg, the Carnegie Corporation, Atlantic Philanthropies) have redirected their attention elsewhere.

Finally, like many movements, civic engagement efforts suffer from an absence of concerted action around a set agenda. A large network that reached broadly across sectors in higher education to advance civic engagement, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), faltered and failed in the late 1990s. No other network has stepped in to fill the void. A Wingspread meeting in 2006 that led to the formation of the Higher Education Network for Civic Engagement (HENCE) sought to enliven the movement through greater coordination. Yet it has been unable to articulate a powerful shared sense of purpose or advance a collective agenda.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

What, then, is required to spur the deep change in institutional priorities and values needed to create the conditions for sustained civic engagement? As Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett pointedly observe, “for universities and colleges to fulfill their great potential and really contribute to a democratic . . . revolution, they will have to do things very differently than they do now. . . . To become part of the solution, higher eds must give full-hearted, full-minded devotion to the painfully difficult task of transforming themselves into socially responsible civic universities and colleges. To do so, they will have to radically

change their institutional cultures and structures, democratically realign and integrate themselves, and develop a comprehensive, realistic strategy” (p. 84). In our view, the answer lies in reorienting the work from a vague emphasis on community involvement toward an agenda that seeks significant societal change. The movement must not only strive to encourage civic impulses and actions among students; it must assume a joint responsibility with the communities with which it works to confront problems and to enact change through every democratic means possible. It requires linking the pursuit of knowledge with the pursuit of a healthier society and a stronger, more robust democracy.

This sense of drift and stalled momentum in civic engagement work raises a number of important questions: Are current civic engagement efforts slowly transforming higher education or have they adapted in ways that foster legitimacy but ultimately fail to fundamentally challenge the dominant culture of higher education institutions and American society? How might the movement navigate the inherent tension between challenging the status quo and securing legitimacy through a measure of accommodation? How can colleges and universities cultivate caring and creative democratic citizens and advance democracy in schools, universities, communities, and society? What sort of institutional commitments are needed to foster civic engagement among students and among academics in order to advance participatory democracy on campus, in the community, and the wider society?

In an effort to explore these questions and others related to the democratic purposes of higher education, a group of thirty-one academic leaders¹ came together in February 2008 at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, for the purpose of critically examining the state of civic engagement in higher education and to determine ways to strategically promote democratic citizenship as a key institutional priority for American colleges and universities. The individuals were called together by the Kettering Foundation and the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) specifically because their ongoing work aligned with the original democratic purposes of the movement, which Frank Newman defined in 1985 as “[restoring] higher education [to] its original purpose of preparing graduates for a life of involved and committed citizenship” (1985, p. xiv). A significant catalyst for this dialogue was Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett’s book, *Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (2007). The premise of *Dewey’s Dream* is that higher education in America has fundamental democratic purposes, both educating for democracy and creating educational institutions that foster the revitalization of democratic society.

We highlight an idea put forth by Benson and his colleagues: university-assisted community schools as one key strategy for achieving this aim. Such partnerships help university students understand the complex socio-political contexts in which social problems exist and encourage civic agency. They draw together partners with disparate strengths (faculty, community members, students) to resolve pressing real-world problems. The model also underscores

the kind of institutional transformation that is required at universities for democratic engagement to be possible.

CHALLENGES TO ENGAGEMENT

At the Kettering meeting, two ideas met with near-universal agreement. The first was that *this nation faces significant societal challenges, and higher education must play a role in responding to them*. The imperative for higher education to respond to social injustice was readily seen in the persistent poverty of our inner cities (“rediscovered” by many in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina), in the widening divide between the rich and poor, in our failure to have a meaningful dialogue about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the emergent economic crisis. There was widespread agreement that colleges and universities have civic and public purposes, including the preparation of an enlightened and productive citizenry and engaging in scholarship that both addresses pressing problems and holds a mirror to society to allow for self-reflection and self-correction. The question was how to achieve these aims. A second point of agreement was that *the civic engagement movement has not realized its full potential*. While not everyone at the meeting characterized civic engagement in higher education as stalled, there was general agreement that the movement has unclear goals, fragmented efforts, and is met with a predominant ideology in the academy that acts contrary to overtly civic aims. Whatever the case, participants expressed the view that important work needs to be done in order to deepen existing work and to draw in others. A number of themes emerged from the Kettering meeting, which we offer here as (necessarily contestable) propositions.

An obligation for higher education to develop the civic agency of its students is not high on the public’s agenda. Despite deeply troubling data regarding political knowledge and interest in public affairs, the ideals of promoting democracy are not pressing concerns for many people across the country. This prevailing view is reflected in student attitudes. As trend data from UCLA’s survey of incoming freshman has shown, over the past two decades students have come to see higher education primarily as a ticket to a good job. Their interests in the more formative aspects of education (e.g., “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” one of the ideals of liberal education) have dramatically declined. As Caryn Musil noted, findings from focus groups conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities show that civic engagement remains a very low priority for many students.

Our inadequate conception of what effective democratic education might look like is reflected in the imprecise and even conflicting language by members of the movement. Currently, a wide variety of terms are used when discussing the public purpose of higher education—such as community engagement, civic engagement, engagement, democratic education, education for democracy,

and so forth. This disparate language reflects substantive divisions within the broader movement. For example (and perhaps put a bit simplistically), there are faculty members who embrace service-learning as a superior means of conveying disciplinary knowledge, while others see it as a transformational pedagogy. This lack of clarity has the very real advantage of enabling a broad range of people to feel they are part of the movement. Vague language, however, also runs the risk of portraying a movement that stands for anything and therefore nothing. Can we find language that has wide “traction” but also inspires and conveys a core democratic purpose?

The movement is highly fragmented and compartmentalized. Perhaps because there is not a unifying vision, the “movement,” such as it is, consists of many regional and national initiatives aimed at promoting a wide variety of activities (e.g., volunteerism, community service, service-learning, university/community partnerships, democratic deliberation, diversity initiatives) to various audiences. Some efforts are wholly disconnected from others. For example, we rarely see instances where democratic deliberation efforts help inform potential partnerships that then lead to rich service-learning opportunities. As the Association of American Colleges and Universities has pointed out, diversity efforts have too often remained divorced from civic engagement efforts. But it is not clear what efforts might profitably be advanced to address this fragmentation. Attempts to create umbrella networks (a “network of networks” as one calls itself) have met with negligible success.

The movement has largely sidestepped the political dimension of civic engagement. With only a few exceptions (the AASCU’s American Democracy Project is a good example), institutional (and national) efforts do not explicitly link the work of engagement to our democracy. What has emerged is a remarkably apolitical “civic” engagement. As one participant put it, “We need a movement that puts the question of the democratic purpose of higher education on the table.” There are pressures in certain sectors (e.g., some public institutions) against doing anything that is seen as “political”—in this sense, partisan activities and political awareness and agency are being confounded. A few participants at the Kettering meeting raised questions about the extent to which colleges and universities could meaningfully play such a role: Can our institutions of higher learning fulfill their various purposes (job preparation, economic development, knowledge creation, cultural resource provision) and also act to promote a strong democracy?

The dominant epistemology of the academy runs counter to the civic engagement agenda. The academy has established legitimacy within society in part through its widely recognized ability to convey expertise. Specialization has produced a great deal of new knowledge, but it has also produced a technocracy that places certain kinds of expertise above all others. One participant offered this critique: “We see no other warrant for

our existence than the expert model.” Excessive homage to a narrow disciplinary guild and the presumption of neutrality has robbed the academy of its ability to effectively challenge society and to seek change. How might a democratic epistemology be articulated? What kinds of knowledge and scholarly practices would it value and seek to support?

A significant thread that ran through the discussions addressed the significant challenges facing civic engagement efforts. The following represents reflections by Derek Barker, program officer at the Kettering Foundation, which were presented the second morning of the meeting. Barker thoughtfully and concisely captures the array of challenges raised at the meeting by participants, ones that must be addressed in order for the civic engagement movement to fulfill its potential.

Eleven Sticking Points: Priorities for the Future of Civic Engagement in Higher Education

By Derek Barker, The Kettering Foundation

One of the key objectives of the colloquium was to survey key leaders and practitioners in the civic engagement of higher education and solicit their frank assessments of the current state of the movement. This list brings together eleven sticking points that were mentioned during the first day of the colloquium. Some participants emphasized good news over bad news, while others used a variety of terms, such as “stalled,” “plateaued,” or “fragmented.” Despite these differences, a number of key unresolved issues emerged as priorities for the next generation of civic engagement work in higher education.

1. Articulate a democratic epistemology. Higher education civic engagement must provide an alternative to the technocratic and expert model and show that citizens can play an active role in the production of knowledge. At present, the movement has developed a coherent critique of the limitations of positivism, expert knowledge, and the implied technocratic politics of excluding citizens from the production of knowledge. However, the democratic alternative has not been fully articulated. This would require more concrete examples of knowledge produced with the active participation of citizens.

2. Connect civic engagement of higher education institutions and professionals to larger civic politics. Higher education institutions and professionals often speak of civic engagement based on their perspectives and when it serves their interests. Wanting to serve the public is not enough if the public doubts that the institution serves the public good. Communities must have a reason to partner with institutions, but we do not know whether the civic engagement efforts currently supplied by universities are really in demand by citizens.

3. Diversify the civic engagement movement. Although both civic engagement and multiculturalism are each receiving attention in higher education, at present these efforts are largely independent of one another. However, civic engagement cannot serve democracy if it is not inclusive of diverse groups and perspectives. At the same time, diversity initiatives cannot have an impact outside of institutions if higher education is irrelevant to society. Proponents of both civic engagement and multiculturalism should recognize their interdependence and common aim to improve democracy.

4. Politicize civic engagement, especially beyond “service.” The civic engagement movement has developed a coherent critique of the idea of service. It has shown that service tends to be interpreted apolitically and in ways that are consistent with expert or technocratic approaches. However, proponents of civic engagement must do more to articulate, document, and evaluate the political benefits of their work.

5. Connect local civic engagement to global issues. Citizens and college students are not currently prepared to engage politically on highly complex and large-scale social problems. Although civic engagement must begin locally, it must ultimately aim at the global level if citizens and students are to make a difference on the most pressing problems.

6. Make the democratic role of higher education explicit as the top institutional priority. Although many institutions have incorporated civic engagement rhetoric, established centers, or implemented projects, in most cases the democratic role of higher education is not infused throughout the institution. Individual projects and programs are not enough to generate culture change. Instead, colleges’ and universities’ commitments to civic engagement should integrate reforms in a variety of areas, including promotion and tenure, disciplinary norms, curriculum design, pedagogy, student life, and institutional governance.

7. Unify the language of civic engagement. Civic engagement reflects a diverse assortment of goals (diversity, social justice, citizenship) and methodologies (dialogue, deliberation, community organizing). However, there is a sense that the movement is fragmented as a result. Often programs adopting different labels compete with one another for funding and attention, giving the appearance of fundamental conflict. While proponents will rightly emphasize different aspects of democratic politics, the movement could make greater progress by articulating the common impulse unifying all the practices and constituencies of civic engagement.

8. Organize faculty for civic engagement. Faculty have led the way in innovating and promoting civic engagement. Despite being marginalized in their fields and discouraged by their institutional reward structures, their passion

has been the key driving force behind the progress that has been made. However, a major obstacle to change is that faculty are trained to think as intellectuals, not as organizers. The next stage of civic engagement will require faculty to learn a new set of skills enabling them to transform their institutions.

9. Address the disconnect between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality.

The basic principles of civic engagement are almost universally recognized. They have been reflected in the language of institutional mission statements and espoused by leaders at the highest levels. Although this is an important indicator of progress, the real practice of civic engagement does not always match the rhetoric. To show that they are serious about civic engagement, institutions must commit significant resources to match their rhetoric.

10. Resist the assimilation of civic engagement by bureaucratic institutions.

Institutions and practitioners alike are talking about ways to enhance the legitimacy of civic engagement projects. This is in itself an important indicator of the progress that has been made. However, civic engagement initiatives are implemented in the context of institutions that have powerful incentives to copy “best practices” and meet evaluation criteria imposed from above rather than engage in genuine democratic experimentation. In order to move forward, civic engagement efforts will have to gain credibility in the eyes of institutions without losing their essential democratic character.

11. Model democratic politics in the internal governance of higher education institutions.

Although some institutions have made conscious efforts to involve the community in their strategic planning, the democratic mission of higher education is in profound tension with the reality of hierarchical and bureaucratic governance. President-centered leadership continues to be the norm in higher education. Students and communities will not learn to take democracy seriously if universities do not model democracy in their own governance.

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a host of activities aimed at advancing the civic and public purpose of American higher education. Dozens of new networks have been established involving tens of thousands of faculty members, administrators, and students. In many respects, civic engagement is flourishing; however, a central question has largely been sidestepped: Engagement for what, to what end? Increasingly, “civic engagement” is a term commonly used in higher education. The 2002 AASCU report referenced earlier noted that while engagement has become “shorthand for describing a new era of two-way partnerships between America’s colleges and universities and the publics they serve . . . it also presents the risk that the term can say everything and nothing at the same time. . . . The lack of clear

definition can leave some campuses and their leaders with the impression that they are ‘doing engagement,’ when in fact they are not” (p. 8). Engagement is often used as an umbrella term, connoting any campus-based activities that connect with or relate to something—issues, problems, organizations, schools, governments—outside the campus. It has a certain idealistic appeal as it relates to institutional mission—preparing socially responsible citizens as graduates—and speaks to the accountability of the college or university to the wider society and public interest.

This emphasis on activity and place is evident in the widespread use of the term “community engagement.” Campuses that embrace the ideal of civic engagement create new courses, service opportunities, offices, and centers. Such activities, programs, and structures fit nicely into the existing norms of the academy. After all, campuses understand how to create new programs and are very interested in promoting learning. They are equally uncomfortable with the notion of encouraging activism among students or seeing their faculty members use their skills to challenge a problematic status quo.

As they are most often expressed, civic engagement activities rarely call on colleges and universities to fundamentally change the ways in which they operate, thus preserving underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors. Engagement defined by activity and place has provided a vitally important foundation for the civic engagement movement. Democratic engagement, however, requires something more—a larger sense of purpose and distinct processes to strengthen our communities and to build a participatory democracy. It also requires careful rethinking of the core work of the academy. It is this democratic imperative and the democratic dimension of engagement that we examine in this book.

The norms of a culture of democratic education are determined by values such as inclusiveness, participation, task sharing and reciprocity in public problem solving, and an equality of respect for the knowledge and experience that everyone contributes to education and community building. These democratic processes and purposes reorient civic engagement to what we are calling “democratic engagement.” Democratic engagement presumes that the only way to learn the norms and develop the values of democracy is to practice democracy as part of one’s education. Needless to say, applying democratic values to academic leadership, the scholarly work of faculty, the educational efforts of staff, and the leadership, personal development, and learning outcomes of students has significant implications for higher education—epistemological, curricular, pedagogical, research, policy, and cultural.

The infusion of democratic values into higher education also has implications for the civic engagement movement. Without an expressly democratic purpose, engagement efforts can be pursued for questionable aims (e.g., good public relations). Even more problematic, engagement runs the risk of being constrained and ultimately trapped by the dominant culture of the academy that privileges specialized expertise above all else. Expertise is important

and has its place. The democratic dimension of engagement, however, is demonstrated by a capacity to also learn in the company of others. It embraces expert knowledge but is critical of expertise that claims an exclusionary position relative to other forms of knowledge and other knowledge producers. Academic culture also favors dispassionate inquiry and tends to look askance at any effort to openly challenge the status quo. It is perhaps no surprise that despite the originating ideal of producing enlightened and engaged citizens, what has emerged is a remarkably apolitical form of civic engagement. Indeed, as we explain in Chapter 1, the larger democratic purpose of the movement has been persistently sidelined such that the dominant framework of civic engagement in American higher education is largely lacking an intentional democratic purpose.

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION WITH A LARGER SENSE OF PURPOSE

The chapters in this book provide examples in which a democratic flowering of civic engagement—what we call “democratic engagement”—is occurring, and they examine conceptually and practically what is needed to deepen democratic engagement to the extent that it becomes part of campus culture. Currently, the United States and the world are experiencing a financial catastrophe. Never has the imperative to strengthen participatory democracy for collective problem solving—at the institutional, local, state, and national levels—been greater. Now, more than ever, colleges and universities are being called upon—and in many cases held publicly accountable—to address localized community needs, to be socially responsive institutions. We believe that a democratic-centered civic engagement effort based on collaboratively addressing pressing real-world problems holds the promise of transforming not only the educational practice and the institutional identity of colleges and universities, but the larger public culture of democracy as well.

This book begins by addressing larger conceptual understandings of the state of civic engagement in higher education, with an introduction by the editors and an opening chapter drawing distinctions between engagement for democracy and what we argue has emerged as the dominant framework of civic engagement on campus today. Matt Hartley then explores, in Chapter 2, the historical contours of the civic engagement movement as a way of understanding the evolution of the movement and the current institutional commitments to engagement. Chapter 3 moves the focus of the discussion from the movement level to the campus, with Ira Harkavy, John Puckett, and Lee Benson examining the work at the University of Pennsylvania on university-assisted community schools as a model of democratic community and campus transformation. In Chapter 4, Harry Boyte and Eric Fretz reclaim the political dimensions of engagement as a key element in restoring its democratic dimensions. William Plater addresses, in Chapter 5, the ways in which deliberate creation of institutional structures can change institutional

culture to sustain civic engagement work. In Chapter 6, former Provost John Presley reflects on the role of the Chief Academic Officer in embedding civic engagement in the core academic work of the campus. Chapter 7, by Nancy Thomas and Peter Levine, brings education for democracy into the curriculum, exploring the role of democratic deliberation as part of teaching and learning. This is followed in Chapter 8 with KerryAnn O’Meara’s analysis of the implications of democratic engagement for faculty work. In Chapter 9, Rick Battistoni and Nick Longo assert the importance of student voice and leadership in advancing democratic engagement and catalyzing institutional change. Edward Zlotkowski then explores, in Chapter 10, what is needed to keep civic engagement vital as a core academic value and a vital form of academic work for the next generation of academic leaders and practitioners. In Chapter 11, Caryn Musil look at deficiencies in the civic engagement movement that have limited its democratic potential and chart a path to a more inclusive, richer, and deeper civic engagement movement. Lorlene Hoyt, in Chapter 12, explores and analyzes the promise and challenges surrounding campus community engagement and the implications that a shift in epistemology has for faculty work and institutional change. Finally, in the last chapter, the editors return to the key issues of democratic purpose and institutional transformation to offer recommendations for concrete, practical ways to shape civic engagement work in higher education.

NOTE

1. Meeting participants:

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 Edward Zlotkowski, Bentley College

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