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Renewing
the
Public Purposes
of
Higher Education

A REPORT BY
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Kettering
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Renewing the Public Purposes of Higher Education

A Report from the
Seminar on Higher Education and Public Life
Washington D.C., June 24-25, 1999

By Scott London



A century ago, one of the most solidly rooted assumptions of American higher education was the importance of preparing students for citizenship. As leaders of the nation's great liberal arts colleges and research universities declared, the mission of higher learning was to enrich and inform public life, to inculcate the skills of citizenship, and to train men and women for careers in public service. During the twentieth century, the civic purposes of higher education have gradually given way to other presumably more pressing demands, from expanding enrollment and strengthening academic disciplines to accommodating diversity and simply making financial ends meet.

A steady stream of reports have appeared in recent years suggesting that the academy's retreat from public life has come at a high cost. Not only are students disengaged from public life and deeply cynical about the political process, but the civic commitment and confidence that once infused America's educators has declined precipitously in recent decades. Today, colleges and universities are looked upon — and often present themselves — not as guardians of the public interest but as instruments of purely private interests such as social mobility and economic advancement. While some institutions still acknowledge the importance of civic responsibility and engagement in their mission statements, it is safe to say that they devote few resources — or even much thought — to its requirements.

But there are stirrings of change in the academy. It may be too early to speak of a full-fledged movement, but a diverse network of higher education leaders have banded together over the last year to assess the problem and to restate and revivify their commitment to civic life. The timeliness and significance of these efforts have been underscored by numerous cover stories and op-ed articles — even stump speeches in Al Gore's campaign for the presidency in 2000 — that stress the vital connection between higher education and democracy.

An important milestone was the December 1998 Wingspread conference, hosted by the Johnson Foundation, which brought together a group of prominent leaders in higher education. “Now is the time to boldly claim the authority and ability to focus our energy on the civic purposes of higher education,” declared the statement that emerged

from the meeting. “Those of us in higher education can change its directions and commitments. We can mobilize support for change from outside constituencies by making alliances with those constituencies. We can shape our cultures, renew our civic missions, and guide our destinies.”

A further indication of change is the effort on the part of a small but growing number of scholars to rethink the underlying assumptions of academic knowledge. The prevailing epistemology of contemporary scholarship, they contend, puts a premium on theoretical and academic knowledge at the expense of what might be called “public” or “practical” knowledge — the sort that derives from group inquiry and collaborative problem-solving. As they see it, higher education needs to promote a more socially responsive ideal that emphasizes the role of public dialogue and collective action as valid sources of truth.

It was against this background that the Kettering Foundation convened the Seminar on Higher Education and Public Life, a two-day event held in Washington D.C., June 24-25, 1999, aimed at bringing together a cross-section of individuals who, in their various ways, are working to narrow the gap between the nation’s academic and civic cultures. It was an impressively diverse gathering of more than 70 people that included college and university presidents, provosts, deans, trustees, faculty, administrators, and student activists, as well as representatives of professional associations, civic organizations, and private foundations.

The impulse for the seminar, as Kettering Foundation president David Mathews observed, came from a sense of historic possibility. The

“Right now there are some words appearing in the lexicon on higher education that have not been around for a good while. They are ‘community,’ ‘service,’ ‘civic,’ ‘public,’ and ‘engage.’ ... These words will only lead to change if we take them seriously and if we hold ourselves and others accountable for what they mean.”

David Mathews
Kettering Foundation

recent appearance of such words as “community,” “service,” “public” and “engage” in the lexicon of higher education signals a change of outlook that could give rise to dramatic changes — provided, of course, that they are not appropriated by defenders of the status quo. “These words,” he said, “will only lead to change if we take them seriously and if we hold ourselves and others accountable for what they mean.”

From a practical perspective, it was hoped that some concrete reform strategies might emerge by bringing together people working for change within the higher education establishment as a whole — from the top down, as it were — with those working at the grassroots level — in classrooms, on campuses, in community-service projects and other venues. The rationale, simply stated, was that if institutional reform efforts are to work they ought to build on what is already working, not attempt to create something from scratch.

“Civic and social responsibility ought to be a fundamental outcome of a liberal education.”

Debra Humphreys
Association of American
Colleges & Universities

With this in mind, representatives from 26 Public Policy Institutes from around the country were invited to participate and share their experiences working at the intersections of higher education and civil society. The Public Policy Institutes are a national network of centers, usually affiliated with colleges and land-grant universities, that offer training in the arts of democracy — deliberation, issue-framing, choice-work, public action, moderating and convening forums, and working with office-holders. “What impresses us about these institutes,” David Mathews said, “is that they are the potential bearers of a different concept of politics — not because they are philosophers, but because they practice a kind of politics that gives a different meaning to ‘public’ and ‘service.’”

Boyd Gibbons, president of the Johnson Foundation, and Elizabeth Hollander, executive director of Campus Compact and one of the chief architects of the Wingspread Declaration, helped set the tone for the seminar by describing their efforts to promote a national debate about the public purposes of higher education. Drafting a declaration was



the easy part, Gibbons said. “The tough part is making anything really change.” Hollander agreed, noting that during the months following the Wingspread conference much of her energy had gone toward developing a document that addresses the civic responsibilities not only of the research university but of the academic community *as a whole*. “We need to create a very different culture in our institutions,” she said. “We can’t teach students to be good citizens unless institutions are good citizens themselves, in terms of how they behave on campus and what they do in their communities. This is something that has to be built from the faculty up as well as the president down.”

CONFRONTING INSULAR ACADEMICISM AND CIVIC DISENGAGEMENT

One of the common refrains during the seminar was that higher education is no longer invested with public purpose and that it has lost an animating sense of mission. There is a pervasive two-mindedness in higher education today, observed Keith Melville of the Fielding Institute. Mission statements acknowledge the importance of preparing students for active participation in civic life, he said, “yet what we do, day to day and week to week, doesn’t have a whole lot to do with that mission.” Furthermore, “there is nothing in faculty evaluations that assigns any importance to public life, citizenship skills, and sensitivity to the concerns, opinions, and views of others”

Shielah Mann of the American Political Science Association related the story of a colleague who, in the course of drafting an institutional mission statement, was rebuffed by fellow faculty for speaking up for citizenship education. “Democracy may be something you in political science care about,” she was told, “but we don’t see how it relates to the lives of our students.”

The problem is that institutions of higher education tend to suffer from “historical amnesia,” in the words of Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota. Many of the civic features of land grant and public universities are simply unknown to most faculty, staff, and administrators. “The stakeholders in higher education don’t normally think about the



public purposes of their work,” Boyte remarked. “The technical focus on efficiency of means cuts out larger questions such as, ‘So what?’ and ‘What’s the point?’”

Civics is simply not on the minds of faculty today. They are generally more concerned with immediate problems such as the inrush of new technologies, said Herman Berliner, provost of Hofstra University. Instead of running a classroom of 20 students, many teachers now find themselves overseeing the education of 10,000 online students all over the world — often with considerably less computer experience than their students. “Presidents aren’t focusing on rebuilding American public life,” Berliner commented.

“Neither are provosts. I’m trying to rework the tenure and promotion standards, and I’m trying to make sure that our education really is as up to date and as inclusive of the benefits of technology as it can be.”

The challenge, then, is making the civic purposes of higher education relevant to an establishment besieged by what are usually perceived as more pressing concerns. Recalling his years as president of the University of Alabama, David Mathews noted that most college and university presidents simply do not spend their time thinking about civic responsibility. The question, in his formulation, is whether the self-interests of institutions can be broadened to encompass the public interest — and, if so, how that might be achieved.

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Elizabeth Hollander
Campus Compact

THE SPREAD OF MARKETPLACE VALUES

The erosion of broad public purposes in higher education has been paralleled by the rise of what some participants spoke of as a default program of “instrumental individualism” — a bottom-line mentality that defines the ends of education in private rather than public terms. This ethos is reflected in the notion of the university as a provider of services. As higher education has become increasingly service-oriented, the political dimensions have been pushed aside, or lost altogether. “Our current problem,” said David Brown of the New School for Social Research, “is that we are trying to be so terribly relevant to the market language of our era.” We talk about education as if it were a commodity — as if you could educate a student the way you might fill up a gas tank. “But, inevitably, people will find a way to fill your tank for less money, so it becomes a downward spiral.”

Several participants acknowledged that from a short-term perspective public engagement may not be necessary to higher education. But if one takes a longer view it becomes imperative. The trouble is that so long as people opt for a short-term view, they systematically undermine the democratic foundations on which higher education is built. The point was made by William Sullivan, long-time philosophy professor at LaSalle University who recently moved to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. “When people try to adopt long-term strategies and hope for short-term results,” he stated, “the undercut that larger possibility.”

“I don’t think institutions of higher education can play a serious role in public life without leaders setting an example. But they are not currently in a position to do so, not only because of the demands of fundraising but also because of the expectation that higher education is supposed to prepare the student for an occupation rather than a full and engaged life.”

Michael Baer
American Council on Education

Michael Baer, senior vice president of the American Council on Education, felt that the shift from a public to a largely private agenda

in higher education represents a profound failure of leadership. “I don’t think institutions of higher education can play a serious role in public life without leaders setting an example,” he observed. “But they are not currently in a position to do so, not only because of the demands of fund-raising, but also because of the expectation that higher education is supposed to prepare the student for an occupation rather than a full and engaged life.”

The growing emphasis on instrumental rationality at the expense of civic engagement in higher education does not represent a shift from one form of education to another — presumably inferior — type. Rather, it exemplifies a misunderstanding of the basic role of education in a democratic society. As William Lacy of the University of California

Davis remarked, “We make a false dichotomy between educating for vocation and educating for citizenship. They cannot be separated.” To prepare students for professional careers without also preparing them for participation in public life is like teaching people how to operate a car without teaching them the rules of the road. Ultimately, private skills have little value unless they can be applied to public ends. Will institutions of higher learning acknowledge and come to terms with this fact, or simply continue to market themselves as purveyors of services? In William Sullivan’s words, “everything hinges on how that question is finally answered.”

“If we don’t engage our deepest purposes and sense of mission, higher education is going to be remodeled in the next ten or twenty years in the image of the University of Phoenix — a profit-making, distance-learning institution with no campus.”

Harry Boyte
University of Minnesota



THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND CIVIC LIFE

Participants also lamented the widening rift between campus and community life, the prevailing theory of academic knowledge that equates scholarship with expertise, and the rise of what some described as a knee-jerk community-service approach to civic engagement. Herb Asher of Ohio State University noted that “some of the underlying models of community service may actually be apolitical — if not anti-political.” The problem with the reigning view of outreach, in Harry Boyte’s view, is that “service is seen as an add-on, as something nice to do on the side, but not as an integral part of fine scholarship or excellent teaching.”

In an incisive after-dinner presentation, Boyte gave substance to many of the problems of higher education by reporting on a study involving senior faculty and administrators at the University of Minnesota. One of the striking themes of the more than thirty interviews he and his colleague Edwin Fogelman conducted was how “radically detached” academic culture had become from public life and society at large. He cited one political scientist who came to the university in 1959 when his department still awarded students credit for working in community projects. “I thought it was part of my job description to work with communities,” he told Boyte and Fogelman. But as the years passed he felt less and less legitimate in that work. Boyte reported similar responses from other faculty who had been at the university more than a decade or two.

“Thirty years ago,” Boyte reported, “the University of Minnesota had a vibrant sense of itself as a great public and land-grant university. There would be a socialization process into that public purpose with all new hires. That happens almost in no departments now. Faculty who had been at the university for some years said that they felt a steady erosion of public purpose. They also felt that erosion closer to come: they don’t have the same departmental discussions they once had. People said that ten or twenty years ago, they had a much more vital conversation.”

“Again and again,” Boyte continued, “we heard about a sense of isolation, a competitive culture, a circle-the-wagons mentality. We also heard a great deal of concern about the spread of marketplace values

— the idea of the student as customer and the notion that the university’s public service mission is largely a commercial one. We also heard fatalism. People expressed a sense that nothing can be done. The faculty was deeply discouraged about the possibility of collective action to change things.”

Boyte went on to propose three strategies toward making higher education more responsive to public life. First, he called for a sustained examination of how civic responsibilities are institutionalized and embodied in the academy. “If we don’t engage our deepest purposes and sense of mission, higher education is going to be remodeled in the next ten or twenty years in the image of the University of Phoenix — a profit-making, distance-learning institution with no campus.” Second, he insisted that deliberative practices need to be strengthened and expanded since they form the crucial link between public engagement and the civic responsibilities of institutions. And, finally, he argued for “a more public epistemology” in higher education, one that draws attention to the civic dimensions of professions and disciplines and to the importance of what he called “public work” — “work with public purposes in public settings that involves publics, or a mix of people.” This idea is very different from the prevailing view of community service as charity work. Traditional service learning emphasizes empathy and compassion for the less fortunate, which is important. “But citizenship and civic education understood as public work is an entirely different matter. Here experiential dimensions tied to reflection and theory become centrally important in teaching core competencies.”

“John Dewey was right. The way you get citizen education is through participation and engagement.”

Eugene Rice
American Association for
Higher Education



REVITALIZING THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The sort of public work Boyte described is not an abstract idea. It is occurring in communities across the country and, as the stories of many seminar participants suggested, it is impressive both in scale and scope — though, by and large, it still occurs under the radar of the news media. The experiences of the Public Policy Institute representatives in particular illustrated some of the many ways colleges and universities can take a more active role in promoting and strengthening democratic life.

The activities take many forms, from dialogue and deliberation to building civic capacity in communities, from naming and framing thorny public issues to restoring trust in socially divided communities. In some cases, they are directly tied to the electoral process. For example, the University of South Carolina and Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida, regularly organize forums and town meetings where candidates for state office can engage with citizens face-to-face. Betty King of the University of Kentucky reported on a series of forums she convened that brought together citizens and local government officials. One of the unanticipated outcomes of the forums was that citizens felt they were given, in her words, “permission to talk.” It’s a sad irony, she said, that in an advanced democracy such as ours citizens should feel they need permission to talk.

Another variant of this idea is for colleges and universities to host meetings where citizens can deliberate amongst themselves about public issues before officially posing their concerns to policymakers. Betty Knighton, director of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, described a statewide series of forums in West Virginia, many of which were held on campuses and moderated by high-school and college students, on “Our Nation’s Kids.” The outcomes were then shared with elected officials — and to great effect, according to Knighton. They valued the information highly, she noted, because “they have no other information like this. It’s the only way they are able to gather what a public thinks of when they come together to talk. They value that kind of collective judgment and see it as being more reflective of what people are willing to do, and not willing to accept, when it comes to policy



affecting their own communities”

But boosting voter turnout and promoting a more healthy exchange between citizens and elected officials — important as they may be — are of little use unless they are supported by other more primary activities, such as strengthening the bonds of trust and reciprocity among citizens, helping to reinvigorate neighborhoods and communities, and building civic capacity among the alienated and disenfranchised. And teaching these civic skills, as a number of participants suggested, cannot be done without a clear commitment on the part of the institution to modeling good citizenship.

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The theme of the university as citizen recurred at several points during the seminar. The importance of the idea was vividly illustrated by Michael Baer, senior vice president of the American Council of Education and former provost of Northeastern University. When he arrived at Northeastern in 1990, along with a new president and vice president, a deep distrust pervaded the relationship between the university and the surrounding community, he said. When the university had tried to expand its campus, for example, the community fought back by establishing new zoning restrictions. “We sat down and started thinking about what approach we could take to improve relationships with the community and how we might develop greater trust between the neighborhood and the institution,” Baer said.

As a first step, the university launched a beautification project that involved removing graffiti and placing flower pots alongside stoops and outside buildings throughout the neighborhood. At the same time, the university president, vice president, and director of government relations began to attend community meetings. “We became involved not by telling the neighborhood groups what to do, but by listening to what they wanted,” Baer recalled. “Eventually, we were able to begin to raise questions about what they thought the university should and could be doing.” They also started hosting community meetings and public forums on campus. At an annual John Coltrane concert, they

set aside 25 percent of the tickets for local high school students. They provided housing on campus for a neighborhood health center. They started to work with local high schools to help improve science and math education. They even built a bridge over an old railroad in order to physically link the university and the surrounding community. The idea behind each of these initiatives, Baer explained, was to “integrate the campus and the neighborhood — to bring community people to the campus and provide a welcoming environment.”

Baer’s story is encouraging in several respects. As Sue Williams of Oklahoma State University pointed out, Northeastern’s approach represents a way of looking at the public not as a vehicle for improving the institution, not “as a constituency or as customers,” but “as a communi-

ty.” Harry Boyte agreed, suggesting that Northeastern’s way of creating connections, opening up facilities to the public, rethinking its curricula in a community-oriented fashion, and participating in community decision-making sessions represents “a practice administrators ought to learn from and take around the country.”

Northeastern’s approach to community-building is rare but not unique. Joanne Zukowski of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke described her work over the past few years to connect the university and the surrounding community — a challenging task under normal circumstances, but especially so in a community made up of roughly equal numbers of blacks, whites, and Native Americans, along with a small but growing Latino population. In addition to racial and ethnic tensions, she said, “the region is plagued with poverty, high crime, underfunded education, and inaccessible and unaffordable health care.”

“There is little evidence that community service and volunteerism on the part of students leads to a long-term commitment to public service or to involvement in government and politics. Some of the underlying models of community service may actually be apolitical — if not anti-political.”

Herb Asher
Ohio State University

A former chancellor once tried to have a wall constructed around the university, Zukowski recalled. Thankfully, some people in the university felt there was a better approach. They realized that working with the community could actually benefit the institution. Much of their early work was aimed at building trust — showing up at board meetings, volunteering to print newsletters, helping to fundraise, representing the university at retreats and planning meetings. The school also provided neutral space for people to come together to work through difficult issues. And it made a point of respecting what Zukowski called “local knowledge” — as distinct from academic, specialized, disciplinary knowledge. As she put it, information has to flow both ways. “Respect is just essential — respect for everyone’s opinion and for everyone’s special interest. We are learning from them and they are learning from us. It is a partnership in both leading and learning.”

Faced with similar challenges, other colleges and universities are experimenting with variations on the same idea. In Naperville, a suburb of Chicago, the College of DuPage has teamed up with the local school district on a visioning process. The University of Pennsylvania and a number of Philadelphia school boards have also started to work together to develop more deliberative conversations about school policies. Along the way, as Harris Sokoloff of UPenn’s Center for School Study Councils pointed out, the university has established a relationship with the Philadelphia Inquirer on a project called “Citizen Voices.” The goal, he said, is “to create conversation citywide about citywide issues.”

“Ultimately, we’re going to have to appeal to the self-interest of the university. They are going to have to see it in their interest to change.”

Douglas Challenger
Franklin Pierce College

MODELING CIVIC PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

Fostering deeper and more reciprocal relationships between citizens and their representatives, and building social capital by establishing networks and partnerships within the community are two important ways higher education can contribute to reinvigorating public life. How might these efforts be integrated into higher education's overall mission of preparing students for a full and active life?

The key, as several participants stressed, is to make civic engagement part of the academic culture so that public-making activities are not seen as separate from what happens in the classroom or on campus but as an integral component of it. Herman Berliner asserted that while the idea of civic responsibility may make for compelling rhetoric, it has little meaning unless it is grounded in actual policies and procedures “Until we say that civic responsibility, or engagement, is a requirement for an education, we’re not really saying we value it.”

Harry Knopke, president of Aquinas college, concurred. But he noted that it is exceedingly difficult to enculturate an entire institution to have a central focus. Those who try to effect change usually do it as discreetly as they can. “The dirty secret of large organizations is that those who want to get something done are counting on the indifference of most others in order for them to move forward their agenda.”

Knopke's point was corroborated by several participants who stressed that innovators don't wait for permission to experiment and break new ground, they forge ahead on their own — often quietly and outside the purview of their colleagues. This dynamic was illustrated by Douglas Challenger, professor of sociology at Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire. He recalled a crisis some years ago at the college following a string of bitter racial incidents. The college responded in the usual fashion, by electing committees, organizing task forces, and filing reports, but the problem continued to fester on campus. Challenger, who had been experimenting with deliberative dialogue in his classes, proposed that his students organize a series of campus-wide forums on the issue. “I got the class together,” he explained, “and they formed four groups and framed the issue, each creating a little issue booklet on



the topic of how to improve race and ethnic relations on campus. Each group then held their own forum using the same framework, four different times.”

The student forums not only helped to alleviate the crisis on campus, Challenger said, but by capturing the imagination of the college president and academic dean, they also had considerable impact on the college leadership. The school subsequently received a grant to integrate deliberative dialogue into the freshman seminar. Not least, the project was highly successful in the eyes of the students themselves. Challenger shared some excerpts from the class evaluations. “I was really cynical at first,” one student remarked. “I was doubtful people would voluntarily show up [at the forums]. After we set the plan into action, I started to get more excited. I really believed we were doing something positive for our campus. Although I rarely showed it, I was very proud of what we were doing. It’s been a great experience. I’ll take it with me after I graduate.” Another student spoke of having his “eyes opened.” He was skeptical at first, he said, fearing that his rights might be stifled and his voice ignored in the forums. “Well, in retrospect, I discovered that these forums truly did promote a place to express your mind and to come up with solutions that will not necessarily prove futile.” He added that the forums taught him “to maintain an objective viewpoint and give my benefit of the doubt before I give up all hope.”

Challenger’s story speaks to the importance of building capacity in students which they can then apply creatively in their everyday lives. Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges and Universities described a remarkably similar case at SUNY Buffalo that underscored the point. Some years ago, she said, the university introduced a required course titled “American Pluralism and the Search for Equality” that was organized as a series of forums and emphasized the importance of dialogue, deliberation, and choicework. When racial violence erupted on campus, it turned out that the students in this class were the first to respond to the crisis by organizing forums and promoting a campus-wide discussion about the problem. “It wasn’t that there was a formal structure in place,” Humphreys noted, but rather that “some capacities had been built within the classroom that could then be translated into action.”

PUBLIC DELIBERATION

One of the common denominators in almost all of the stories of civic engagement reported at the seminar was the element of public deliberation, a form of democratic discourse that differs sharply from debate, bargaining, advocacy, rhetoric and other common types public discussion. Following a usage that traces back to ancient Greece, deliberation denotes a process of group dialogue aimed at weighing different courses of action before settling on one of them. “We deliberate not about ends,” Aristotle wrote, “but about the means to attain ends.”

The concept of public deliberation figures prominently in the history of political ideas, but it is only in recent years that it has entered the vocabulary of popular discourse. A good deal of the recent interest in the concept can be credited to Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, Michael Sandel, James Fishkin, and other political thinkers who have advanced it as an alternative to the divisiveness and mean-spiritedness of contemporary public discourse. Curtis Absher of the Cooperative Extension in Lexington, Kentucky, underscored that deliberation is the most effective way for people to resolve problems where personal convictions are at issue. The process also helps to establish trust and mutual respect among individuals. In short, it helps “to dignify the process of inquiry.”

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Public deliberation has other benefits as well. According to Kettering Foundation senior associate Bob Kingston, who presented a video with highlights from a number of citizen forums around the country, the outcome of deliberation is “not a consensus (which is often the lowest common denominator of what everybody thinks), and not so much a compromise (which is what everybody accepts and nobody wants), but rather a sense of shared purpose, a sense in which people can go forward.”



Several participants struck a similar chord. Kim Sebaly pointed out that on the campus of Kent State University, where he directs a Public Policy Institute, there is a memorial for the four students who were shot in 1970 on which the following words are inscribed: “Inquiry, learn, and reflect.” A traditional education can provide training in these skills, he said. But a truly civic education has to go a step further by teaching students how these skills are applied in the public sphere. “Deliberation moves us in that direction,” he explained, because “what the process helps us to think about is a way of acting. “The value of deliberation is not that it yields “hard outcomes,” as Charles Lacy of the University of California David noted, but rather that it dignifies the process of inquiry. Harris Sokoloff remarked that many people who walk into a forum already know what they are going to say. But once the group begins to deliberate, they quickly discover that what they were prepared to say can no longer be said the same way.

But lest public deliberation be thought of as a panacea for our democratic ills, David Mathews emphasized that it is ultimately a means, not an end. You can’t make common cause with people around means, he said, only around ends. “The word ‘deliberation,’ for those of us who use it, is a code for a different idea about politics. It’s a return to the ancient idea that citizens can govern themselves. Deliberation simply suggests that people become a public by making choices together and acting on them.”

TOWARD A RICHER CONCEPTION OF THE PUBLIC

Mathews’s underlying point has far-reaching implications, for it suggests that how we respond to the problems of higher education has a lot to do with the models of politics to which we subscribe. If politics is defined in terms of political campaigns, then civic involvement may mean handing out pamphlets on a street corner. If it is defined in terms of service and volunteerism, then civic engagement may mean helping the needy. But if it is seen as “that life which we necessarily share,” in the words of Bob Kingston, then civic engagement involves any process that can help us to address our common problems in a productive way.

“The real challenge for those of us concerned about the spirit of our communities turns on developing a stronger and richer concept of the

public,” observed Paul Sunderland of Oregon State University. All too often, higher education sees the public as either a constituency to be served or as a market to be exploited. Neither of these conceptions permit much of a relationship with the public. “Higher education’s concept of the public,” Sunderland said, “simply does not allow it to do anything about public life.”

According to Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University, the question we must ask today is to what extent current trends in higher education may have run their course. Our current predicament traces back to the turn of the century when a new understanding of scholarship began to take root in the American university, he explained. Authority shifted from politics and the public good, broadly defined, to scientific knowledge and professional expertise. Social issues, once resolved through the crucible of public debate, were now redefined as technical issues. And the civic republicanism that informed the humanities was supplanted by a social science that presented itself as a more reliable source of truth than the favoritism of politics, the corruption of personality, and the exclusiveness of partisanship.

But, inevitably, the shift had some troublesome consequences, according to Rosen. Civic education, once an integral part of the university’s mission, gave way to an emphasis on credentialing and preprofessional training. Public service, once considered an essential function and outcome of higher education, was relegated to the margins of academic life. And, as people assimilated into the culture of higher learning and transferred their sense of identity from communities of place to communities of interest, the academy detached itself from the world around it.

Rosen observed that while the reigning model of higher education has carried the day for a century or more, cracks in the foundation have

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Paul Sunderland
Oregon State University

begun to appear in recent years. Recognizing the signs of decay is imperative for it is only out of the “crumbling of the old regime,” as he put it, that something new can rise up and take its place. So long as institutional reform is aimed at fixing a system in disrepair, it will be fruitless at best, and damaging to higher education’s already diminished authority at worst.

What we must do, Rosen suggested, is pay attention to those experiences we have had and those experiments we have seen that embody a different model of higher education, one in which “knowledge-in-play is different than knowledge-as-expertise, where the meaning of politics is not defined as a threat to truth but as truth-making, where public identity is shaped not by entrance into professional or prudential categories, and where public service is genuine and alive.” It is essential not only that we acknowledge and give voice to the impulses for change in higher education, Rosen concluded, but also that we promote and strengthen an emergent outlook that sees democratic citizenship and public engagement as prerequisites to a meaningful education.

“The dirty secret of large organizations is that those who want to get something done are counting on the indifference of most others in order for them to move forward their agenda.”

Harry Knopke
Aquinas College

David Mathews underscored the point, noting that civic renewal requires more than simply identifying inspiring success stories or strategizing about how to overcome the barriers to change. Real change is not accomplished by overcoming barriers, he said. In what proved to be a popular metaphor, he spoke of the power of “lift” in aerodynamics. When Orville and Wilbur Wright first produced flight, they did so not by “overcoming barriers” such as gravity or drag, but by experimenting with the possibilities of lift — the force supporting the airplane in flight. The metaphor is useful, Mathews said, because “what this meeting is about, ultimately, is not the barriers to change, but rather where we might find the lift. That lift may reside in the ability to think of public life in a different way.”



SUMMARY

In June 1998, a year before the Washington seminar, the Kettering Foundation convened a similar gathering to explore the crisis of confidence in the professions. What emerged from the meeting was a clear sense that although some institutions — most notably, the press and the foundation world — had initiated far-reaching reform efforts aimed at restoring public trust and strengthening their ties to the community, higher education still lagged behind. Despite a wide range of promising initiatives and projects — and a good deal of rhetoric — there was still no institution-wide commitment to civic renewal.

By the summer of 1999, however, the situation was clearly different. In the wake of several high-profile academic conferences and symposia and some significant media attention — along with a growing recognition, perhaps, that higher education is partly to blame for the anemia of American public life — the academic community was now talking seriously about rejuvenating civic life. Whether the renewed attention to the issue would translate into some concrete reform strategies was the question on everybody's lips as the Washington seminar got underway.

As it happened, the discussion took an unanticipated turn. While the meeting was aimed at exploring practical ideas for change, the group found itself focusing on a more fundamental and difficult problem — that of establishing a common framework for action. As several participants acknowledged, collective action is meaningless unless it is informed by common metaphors, models, and mindsets. And, as the seminar clearly showed, that common ground was still lacking.

By and large, it was felt that civic renewal efforts in higher education tend to be informed by a narrow conception of civic responsibility that thwarts rather than encourages public engagement. As Roland King of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities put it, people in higher education spend a lot more time talking to the public than listening to the public. All too often, they take the attitude that “we know and they don't, so they should be listening to us.” The



central question we must ask, he insisted, is “how do we learn to listen better?”

In short, the seminar may not have fulfilled its original mission of articulating practical strategies for change. But it succeeded in revealing some important differences of outlook — differences which suggest that institutional reform in higher education may turn on developing a new way of thinking about civic life.

The seminar also succeeded in drawing together civic educators who are breaking new ground in their institutions and communities and thereby modeling a new approach that can guide and inspire future efforts. As the experiences of many participants suggested, the most promising signs of change appear to be found at what the University of Virginia’s Nancy Gansneder called the “intersections” and the “fringes” of higher education. They are usually modest and underfunded programs aimed at making academic and community life part of a common enterprise invested with public meaning and purpose. Harris Sokoloff described it as “community engagement through learning.”

As the seminar drew to a close, Harry Boyte summed up the central challenge facing higher education today. “We are role models as well as embodiments of larger patterns,” he observed. “We are the architects of culture in all sorts of institutions. In fact, every system is structured by the models and concepts and practices that people gain in higher education. So, when we take on the challenge of revitalizing the public spirit and practices within our institutions, we have tremendous opportunities for larger impact. Higher education is in the midst of great change. The question is what kind of change it will be — and whether we will shape it or be the objects of it.

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