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Higher Education  
and  
Public Life:  
Restoring the Bond

A REPORT BY  
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Foundation

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# Higher Education and Public Life: Restoring the Bond

A Report from the  
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By Scott London

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND PUBLIC LIFE: RESTORING THE BOND

“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1820, “and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.” A staunch believer in the virtues of higher learning, Jefferson saw “the diffusion of knowledge” among the people as vital to the preservation of a free and democratic society. Indeed, as he surveyed his achievements toward the end of his life, he noted that the defining act of his political career was not his rise to the presidency, or his drafting of the Declaration of Independence, but rather his founding of the University of Virginia.

After nearly 200 years, Jefferson’s ideas still resonate in the halls of academe. In their mission statements and public pronouncements, American educators still stress the vital link between higher learning and democracy. Courses in “civics” are still a required part of the curriculum at most schools. And community service today plays a significant role in the academic experience of many undergraduates.

Yet the spirit of Jefferson’s vision has been largely hollowed out during the last half-century. As colleges and universities scramble to make financial ends meet, to keep pace with the onrush of new technologies, and to better prepare students for careers in the professions, their larger civic purposes have become something of an afterthought. The idea that universities are guardians of a common culture, or that higher education itself confers on its beneficiaries a status that imposes certain social obligations, is now mostly idle rhetoric.

The deepening divide between higher education and public life is reflected in a wide range of problems, from the indifference of many institutions to their surrounding communities, to the rise of distance learning programs and “virtual” academies without campuses, student activities, or even permanent faculty. It is reflected, too, in trustees who reward presidents not for fostering shared values on campus or enriching its civic culture, but for raising money and generating good publicity for the institution. It can also be seen in a new breed of scholarship which, in the words of David Thelen, editor of the *Journal of American History*, is “too obscure to appreciate and too remote from everyday life.”

The most dramatic evidence of the breach between America’s academic and civic cultures comes from students themselves. Reports point to a widespread and deepening sense of apathy and disengagement on campus. The 1999 freshmen survey conducted by the University of California-Los

to stem the decline of public participation and trust in American politics. What is needed, ultimately, is a reassessment of the academy's basic function in, and obligation to, the democratic process.

As a research organization, the Kettering Foundation has been studying the connection between higher education and public life for some time. In 1993, The Harwood Group issued a wake-up call with the report *College Students Talk Politics*. Based on a study commissioned by the Kettering Foundation, the report suggested that colleges and universities reflect, and in many ways bear some responsibility for, the erosion of civic engagement in America. While community service among students is on the rise, their interest in politics has reached record lows. When they discuss politics on campus, they tend to do so in the most disparaging terms. Students feel that “the political education they receive today — at colleges and universities as well as in what they see and experience in their daily lives — only reinforces everything they believe to be wrong with politics.”

The Harwood study gave substance to what many observers of American society had been sensing for some time, namely, that the troubles confronting higher education are not unlike those facing other professions such as the press, law, medicine, and K-12 education — institutions that have either alienated their constituencies and provoked public mistrust, or in some fundamental sense divorced themselves from the pressing concerns of public life. The study also reinforced what the foundation has learned from working with professionals and organizations to help narrow the gap. Experience suggests that restoring public confidence is not just a matter of launching a new public relations campaign or community outreach project, as many professionals presume. Nor is it a matter of simply “engaging the public” through focus groups or community forums. The evidence shows that, if anything, these approaches only deepen the public's anger and resentment toward institutions.

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The 1998 Seminar on the Professions and Public Life drew attention to these challenges and sought to tease out their implications for the academy. The gathering brought together about 70 leaders from higher education, the press, the foundation world, and government to look at the academy in the context of a generally declining faith in the professions — and the political process as a whole — and to see what role it might play in reversing current trends. The task of revitalizing the academy's civic mission will not be an easy one, the participants concluded. Colleges and universities will need to attend to a host of problems, from “atomized faculties” that fail

Angeles found only 17 percent of students interested in “influencing the political structure,” 26 percent interested in keeping up with political affairs, and 28 percent interested in “being a community leader.” By contrast, a full 73 percent of students said they want to be well-off financially.

Despite these worrisome trends — or perhaps because of them — there is now a growing movement under way aimed at revitalizing the civic responsibilities of higher education. During the last two or three years, the topic has been at the center of numerous high-level academic conferences and symposia. Books, cover stories, and major articles in publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* have taken up the issue. William Galston, the prominent University of Maryland scholar, has launched a major new initiative called the National Alliance for Civic Education to, as he puts it, “end a generation of neglect and give civic education its rightful place of honor in our national life.” In addition to these developments, new programs and projects have been initiated on campuses across the nation under the banner of civic renewal.

When the Kettering Foundation convened the first in a series of seminars on higher education and public life in June 1998, it was still too early to speak of a bona fide movement. There were certainly some promising initiatives taking place and a growing sense in many quarters that higher education needs to address itself more seriously and systematically to the problems of public life. By the summer of 2000, however, civic responsibility had become a major topic of conversation — and even some concerted action — on a wide range of academic fronts. As the University of Minnesota’s Harry Boyte declared in a recent issue of *Academe*, “the world of academia has rediscovered civic education.”

Colleges and universities have responded in a variety of ways. Some have strengthened their ties to their communities — helping out in local schools, building playgrounds for children, and sponsoring educational programs and special cultural events for local residents. Others have launched new centers on campus aimed at promoting the moral and ethical development of their students, either through educational research on how to nurture character and civic virtues or through the production of new curricular materials. Some institutions have taken a more integrated approach by combining research, teaching, and public service. While these efforts are encouraging, much more needs to be done if colleges and universities hope

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to reach out across disciplinary boundaries to the increasingly pervasive emphasis on preprofessional training rather than traditional liberal arts in most schools. But the participants also found hope in the nascent movement to “relocalize” institutions of higher learning, to articulate a concept of “public scholarship,” and to reassess the traditional dichotomy between the expert and the public.

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The first Seminar on Higher Education and Public Life, held in June 1999, took the conversation a step farther by exploring some of the practical ways in which colleges and universities across the nation are addressing the problems of apathy and disengagement. In addition to spotlighting innovative projects and programs, the seminar took up some of the fundamental values and assumptions behind these efforts. The ensuing discussion revealed some crucial differences of outlook regarding the meaning of civic engagement — differences which, it turns out, play an important role in determining what sorts of programs are instituted on campus and to what end.

In an after-dinner talk, Harry Boyte pointed out that civic engagement is often narrowly defined in terms of community outreach or public service. It is seen as something carried out *on behalf of* the community, instead of *in partnership with* the community. What is needed, he said, is “a more public epistemology,” one that emphasizes the arts of public discourse, the cultivation of civic imagination and capacity, the importance of engaging alternative points of view, and the value of engaging in “public work.”

What are the implications of this approach for higher education? Are there institutions of higher learning that are successfully implementing civic practices? And, if so, can these examples guide and inspire others in their own efforts to engage students in public life? These were the key questions as the dialogue entered its third year.

Held at L’Enfant Plaza in Washington, D.C., the 2000 Seminar on Higher Education and Public Life brought together close to 100 participants. They included college and university presidents, provosts, deans, administrators, faculty, trustees, association representatives, and students, along with an assortment of foundation directors, community leaders, journalists, and elected officials.

A nationwide alliance of Public Policy Institutes (PPIs) joined the Kettering Foundation in organizing the event. At present, there are 29 PPIs around the country, all but two of which are associated with institutions of higher education. Usually sponsored by academic departments or coopera-

tive extension systems, these learning centers are devoted to practicing the arts of public dialogue and promoting civic engagement “from the ground up.”

“We trust that participants in this seminar will learn from the experiences of the PPIs and draw on their examples in exploring fresh approaches to civic engagement,” Kettering Foundation President David Mathews told the participants as the meeting got under way. “It is our hope that this will stimulate new ideas and help to create new alliances — between organizations, trustees, administrators, students, faculty, and maybe even legislators.”

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS: WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?**

“Very few colleges and universities today can say honestly that they are serving the needs of the democratic public,” said Keith Melville, professor at the Fielding Institute, in the seminar’s opening plenary. “Some people talk about the ‘mission drift’ of higher education. But it seems to me that it’s a good deal stronger than drift. There are forces today that are pushing very hard to create a new kind of university.” This new university takes its cues not so much from the needs of a free and democratic society as from the needs of the free market, he said. “Many parts of the higher education system are beginning to act like the rest of the economy. Higher education has become an ‘industry.’ It ‘competes’ for students. It even talks about ‘market share.’”

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Fielding Institute*

Today’s colleges and universities have little in common with the sort of learning communities envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and other early advocates of civic education. As John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*, “democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience.” He and his contemporaries believed that the purpose of education, its core mission, is to “create, in our students and in ourselves, the capacities for associative living.”

For the better part of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, this idea was alive and well in American higher education. Since then, however, it has lost ground to what are often seen as more pressing imperatives. According to Melville, this shift is the result of four major and related changes during the last half-century: 1) the rise of professionalism with its implicit assumption that for every public problem there is a technocratic solution, one that demands objectivity and expertise; 2)

the growing emphasis on preprofessional training and specialization at the expense of the traditional liberal arts; 3) the secession of the university from the local community; and 4) the spread of market-place values and corporate influences in higher education. “It is the convergence of these forces,” said Melville, “which has tended to push out a concern for public life.”

William Sullivan of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching framed the problems of American higher education in terms of the tragedy of the commons. “One of the dilemmas of a society that prizes both individual freedom and collective action,” he said, “is that what is good for *me* is not necessarily good for *us* — what is individually strategic, if it is practiced by a whole group of people, makes life collectively worse.” One of the critical tasks for higher education therefore is to better understand and cultivate the capacity for collective action. To be an effective citizen, one needs to learn the arts of democratic participation. “That’s what the Founders of the nation had in mind, and they made no bones about that.”

How can higher education take an active role in rebuilding public life? This question has elicited a wide range of responses in recent years. Not surprisingly, the answers seem to depend in large part on the model of citizenship to which a person subscribes. Those who define citizenship in instrumental terms — in terms of rights, benefits, and the act of voting — tend to support an academic approach geared toward expertise and professionalization. Those who define the good citizen as an active and responsible member of society tend to emphasize moral education and service learning. And those who embrace a conception of citizenship that defines the good citizen as someone who engages in “public work” aimed at advancing the common good tend to support a combination of approaches that emphasize collaborative problem solving, public deliberation, reflection, and the development of civic capacity.

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## **POLITICS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ON CAMPUS?**

Four approaches to civic education were the focus of a lively and wide-ranging discussion following the opening plenary session. Moderated in the style of a deliberative public forum, the purpose of the dialogue was to explore the pros and cons of the various educational approaches outlined below before going on to develop specific action strategies.

• *Learning by Doing: The Public Service Component.* Advocates of the public service approach feel that the isolation of colleges and universities contributes to a lack of civic-mindedness among young people today. In their view, increased opportunities for student involvement in the community beyond the campus can promote greater engagement in civic life. Experiential education through work in neighborhoods and nonacademic communities, especially when accompanied by intellectual analysis and opportunities for reflection, could motivate students to take a more active role in public affairs.

• *Learning by Talking: Acquiring Deliberative Skills.* Advocates of this approach maintain that the ills of American democracy stem in large part from our failure as citizens to engage each other in constructive dialogue. The most important part of public life, in this view, is the process by which we grapple with multiple perspectives and priorities, explore the pros and cons of different policy options and work together to devise practical solutions. Colleges and universities, therefore, should train students in the art of deliberative discussion and consensus-building.

• *Learning by Practicing: Democratizing the Campus.* This position holds that colleges and universities are hierarchical and antidemocratic by design and as such do not create an atmosphere that is conducive to education for citizenship. Students who are given no opportunity for participation within the university setting are not adequately prepared to assume responsibilities in democratic life. Proponents of this option believe the university should create a more egalitarian, democratic culture within its own walls by including all members in the process of governance and campus decision making.

• *Learning by Learning: A Classical Academic Model.* Proponents of this option believe that the problem with American political life is the lack of a thoughtful and well-informed citizenry. The best remedy for civic apathy and disengagement, in their view, is for colleges and universities to go back to what they have traditionally done best — to giving students a quality education that embraces both the liberal arts and preprofessional training. Because discipline and critical thinking are crucial to effective citizenship, they insist, a college education must be fashioned to provide students with the intellectual skills necessary to participate in public life.

The forum also served to exemplify the sort of deliberation practiced in the Public Policy Institutes. The forum format is one that “speaks to the concerns and the values that we are trying to work through,” said Robert McKenzie of the Kettering Foundation, in introducing the discussion.

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Going into the forum, the participants were asked to write down which approach best reflected their personal values. Judging from these responses, their preferences were divided as the conversation began. More than half of the participants favored the service-learning model, while the classical academic model drew the least support. These responses were significant, it turned out, because as the participants reflected on their shared experiences as a group and explored the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach, there was a discernible shift of emphasis away from a one-size-fits-all strategy to a more integrative approach. By the end of the forum, two-thirds of those who had initially advocated service learning found that they favored a more holistic approach that brings together components from all four models. Similarly, a majority of those who initially had emphasized the value of deliberation in the classroom came out of the forum feeling that a more integrative method was needed.

Some of the most spirited exchanges during the forum revolved around the issue of service learning. The rationale for this approach, simply stated, is that the best way to prepare students for citizenship is to provide *experiential* lessons about responsibility, community, and the workings of democracy, and that this requires that the experience of the street be brought into the classroom. Several participants offered eloquent testimony on the benefits of this model. For example, Jose Jaime Rivera, president of University of the Sacred Heart in San Juan, Puerto Rico, noted that compulsory service-learning and internship programs at his institution are having some very positive outcomes. “Students become very aware of other human beings,” he said, “and they begin to reflect on their own prejudices and their own lives. It’s really very rewarding.”

Service-learning programs have grown dramatically in recent years and the approach is now embraced by colleges and universities across the country. Figures also indicate that volunteerism has reached record levels among college undergraduates. But, paradoxically, the same studies show that students’ interest and involvement in *politics* has never been lower. At first glance, this contradiction seems strange, since one would think that greater involvement in volunteer work would parallel a growth in political

awareness. But according to Amy Gibans-McGlashan, executive director of Vermont Campus Compact, “students are participating in service because they see it as more timely, more immediate than politics. Politics is far too remote. It takes too long. It is too large of an animal to get their hands around.”

The fact that community service does not necessarily translate into civic or political engagement was not surprising to some participants. Kettering Foundation senior associate Robert Kingston wryly observed that “Andrew Carnegie did enormous service to America’s communities, but I don’t think he was the ideal democratic citizen.” If anything, this disjunction underscores the fact that service-learning programs are often conceived of as benefits bestowed *on* the community *by* the university. Several participants noted that the important distinction between *servicing* a community and *building* or *strengthening* a community is often lost on academics. “There is no real recognition of the interrelationships between the community and the university, so it tends to reinforce the disconnect,” commented William Lacy of University of California-Davis. The key to an effective service approach, he said, is to frame it as “service *with* the community, as opposed to service *for* or *to* the community.”

Some participants were also uncomfortable with the idea of mandatory community service. The very idea is oxymoronic: when volunteerism becomes compulsory, it is no longer volunteerism in any true sense. Bernard Firestone, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Hofstra University, noted that students are usually quick to catch on to this. “They come in, they don’t question it, and they perform it every year. But as they become upperclassmen, they do it with less and less enthusiasm and participation. Part of that is because they are affected by the community at large where it’s not mandatory.” This feeling tends to do more harm than good, he added. “It only reinforces the split between the university and the community.”

The idea of learning-by-talking was also explored in some depth during the forum. Many participants spoke from personal experience about the benefits of deliberation in helping students “work through” difficult issues together. Public deliberation brings back the idea of the ancient Greek *polis* or the New England town meeting. The process is one that emphasizes communal learning, participatory inquiry, and the engagement of alternative points of view. Douglas Challenger of Franklin Pierce College commented that this approach is very effective in counterbalancing the conventional

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*William Lacy  
University of California-Davis*

## THE UNBROKEN CIRCLE

In an after-dinner presentation, J. Herman Blake and Emily L. Moore, a distinguished husband-and-wife team based at Iowa State University, used Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of what higher education must strive to achieve. “Even though the discovery and transmission of knowledge is the principal rationale for the academy,” they argued, “not all wisdom and knowledge is the province of higher education.” It is only through the application of academic learning — through public deliberation, cooperation, and work within the community — that a liberal education can mature into public wisdom and meaningful civic engagement.

In his essay, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that civic engagement was crucial to the formation of his personal philosophy of nonviolence. Intellectual learning alone was not a sufficient basis for actualizing his program for social change. It was only in “the sphere of practical action,” as he put it, that he was able to sort out his views and clarify his convictions. “The experience in Montgomery,” he wrote, “did more to clarify my thinking on the question of nonviolence than all of the books that I had read.”

Blake and Moore stressed that “institutions of higher education — like all social institutions — have a civic responsibility because they are a part of a democratic society that requires civic engagement to reach its highest potential. Given the social demography of our country, higher education has a responsibility to reach out to and include diverse communities in a variety of ways. Even as we include diverse groups, higher education must also be accessible to the lessons and wisdom these diverse communities bring.”

The link between higher education and the larger society, Blake and Moore observed, can be likened to what people in the churches and associations of the rural South sometimes call “the unbroken circle.” The academy must always remember that it is part of a community, they said, “in spirit” and “in fact.” It must continually reaffirm that sense of community, that link to others, and that responsibility to the common good. “Let no circumstance break the social bonds.”

model of politics, the sort characterized “by special interest groups, political action committees, lobbyists, and experts all vying for impact.” Implicit in this approach is the idea that politics does not have to be a zero-sum game, as many people presume, but that it can forge connections and common ground among people and help establish a framework for collective action.

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Deliberation is certainly not a cure-all for higher education, asserted Harris Sokoloff of the University of Pennsylvania. “Deliberative skills are not the only skills that we need to develop in students, nor is learning through deliberative dialogue the best way of learning certain kinds of things. Debate is an important skill. Adversarial conversations are important skills to learn for lots of reasons. Dynamic construction has a place. It may be an increasingly small place, but I think we have to remember that, in fact, deliberation is only part of what it means to be a citizen and what it means to be politically engaged.” Sokoloff went on to stress the importance of the third option, learning-by-practicing — protesting, demonstrating, lobbying, and other kinds of political activities that may not be deliberative.

Sometimes people have to get angry and take action. The question, as Alvin Sokolow of the University of California-Davis declared, is what to do with that anger and what kind of action will be most effective. “If you go home and sulk rather than engage the person you’re angry at, no societal purpose is served. On the other hand, if you use your anger as a vehicle for engagement then you can create an ethos of participation.” When it becomes an integral part of the institution, he added, that ethos can have a powerful effect on the way people go about their daily business — in departmental discussions, in the classroom, in the residences, in the financial office.

The idea that talking and acting are interrelated, that one follows from the other, came up again in the discussion of the fourth approach to civic education — learning-by-learning. Those who favor the classical academic model tend to believe that a liberal arts education, by definition, is one that prepares students for citizenship, at least insofar as it introduces them to the enduring values of Western civilization. Again, as several participants noted, this model has much in common with the deliberative approach. “The assumptions that lie behind this model don’t make any sense,” William Sullivan said, “unless you already have some sympathy for the idea of deliberative democracy, because it’s not clear why you would need or want exposure to anything except that which satisfies your particular consumer

desires.”

Mike D’Innocenzo, professor at Hofstra University, underscored the point. To be effective, he said, the classical academic model requires elements of the deliberative approach, such as engaging alternative points of view and finding common ground. Conversely, the deliberative model is substantially weakened unless it is grounded in the values of critical thinking and academic excellence.

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Clearly, then, there was considerable support for the classical academic approach to civic education during the forum. As the conversation drew to a close, Katy Herriger of Wake Forest University remarked, “I spend most of my time on my campus advocating models one, two, and three, because you don’t have to persuade people as to model four. But what this conversation has made me realize is that four matters — ideas matter. I mean, that’s the spark.”

If a consensus emerged at the end of the forum, Garry Hesser of Augsburg College perhaps best summed it up. “Every one of these choices is necessary, but not sufficient,” he stated. “Most of them require a level of investment that goes way beyond what we are currently doing. We are going in the opposite direction.”

## **CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN THE ACADEMY AND PUBLIC LIFE**

“Celibacy does not suit a university,” Alfred North Whitehead once remarked. “It must mate itself with action.”

How does a university mate itself with action? How does it become an active player in public life? And what does this mean for American colleges and universities in practical terms? After the forum, the meeting broke out into five sharply focused sessions, devoted to specific aspects of the relationship between higher education and public life. The work groups explored: 1) what happens in the classroom, 2) democracy on campus, 3) learning in and with the community, 4) the link between expert knowledge and public judgment, and 5) the disconnect between higher education and government.

The small-group discussions were, by most accounts, the most valuable and productive aspect of the Washington seminar. They allowed participants not only to share experiences and compare notes but to address themselves to the specific challenges and opportunities facing the academy today. After the breakout sessions, each team reported back to the whole group, and these reports in turn served as a point of departure for the final plenary session.

The purpose of the breakout groups was to examine the strained relation-

ship between the academy and society at large from several different vantage points. One group explored the problem through the lens of professionalism and academic scholarship, for instance, while another took up the role of civic education within the classroom. But in each session the core question was

essentially the same: How can people in higher education begin to reweave the strands that connect their work to the larger community?

It was clear at the outset that any effort to restore the bond — to build and strengthen relationships with society at large — faces a host of formidable challenges. For example, there is still a pervasive ethos among American educators that regards academic insulation as essential to a liberal education. This view suggests that the purpose of higher learning is to cultivate the intellect through reading and reflecting on the great works of the Western canon, preferably in an academic environment free of worldly pressures and distractions. Because this mind-set is still deeply rooted in the American academy, the call to throw open the gates and let in the community tends to be met with suspicion, sometimes even outright antagonism, by defenders of the old faith.

Still, developments in higher education in recent decades — from the rise of community- and service-based learning to the increasing emphasis on group inquiry and collaborative problem solving — suggest that the “ivory tower” model is a thing of the past. The challenge for American academics now is to find meaningful and productive ways of actually joining with people in communities, of making their work relevant and useful to the democratic polity. At the same time, they need to bear in mind that the “ivory tower” mentality cuts both ways. People outside the academy often regard colleges and universities as separate, isolated, and inaccessible.

According to Betty Knighton of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, people in higher education need to ask: “What are the portals to the university and are those portals clearly understood within the community? Does the community understand that it shares interests in common with the university? And is it willing to make the effort to understand if the university is making the effort on its part to articulate those issues?”

Improving the relationship between the university and the community must begin with raising these issues. The institution can then begin to find ways of organizing, building, and sustaining relationships within the community. Scott Peters of Cornell University stressed the need for long-term relationships that are carefully nurtured and ongoing. At the moment, he said, far too little attention is given to the craft of organizing. “One of the

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ways of seeing the problem of the disconnect between citizens and higher education is that there isn't a building of relationships and partnerships over time."

These relationships within the community can serve as a basis for a deeper association between the university and other groups and professions in society, such as foundations, grassroots organizations, the press, even the corporate world. Hopefully, by extension, these relationships will promote and enhance public dialogue and make the policy-making process more reflective of, and accountable to, the public.

But the first step, always, is for the college or university to reexamine its role in the community, its commitment to democratic values on campus and in classrooms, its relationship to government and, at a deeper level, its basic philosophy about the meaning and uses of knowledge.

For the work group examining the link between expert knowledge and public judgment, the epistemology of higher education presents a difficult challenge for those who wish to encourage civic renewal within the academy. The problem, at bottom, is that what works in the academy does not necessarily work in the public sphere. In the academy, knowledge is valued to the extent that it makes an original contribution to its given field or discipline. In the public sphere, by contrast, knowledge is valued to the extent that it can advance specific public ends. Needless to say, these two forms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive. Academic expertise has a valuable role to play in serving the public good, as in developing a new vaccine or determining the effects of ozone depletion, for example. The trouble is that many of the problems of public life are not technical in nature. They are based not so much on conflicting information as on conflicting values and convictions.

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Academic knowledge has little currency in public debates over abortion, affirmative action, free speech, or capital punishment. If anything, conventional expertise tends to exacerbate these kinds of disputes because it focuses on facts rather than values. Expertise also presents itself as inherently superior to other forms of knowledge, such as personal experience, group wisdom, or public judgment. As a result, it tends to thwart rather than promote constructive dialogue in public venues.

The question, then, is whether experts and the public can come to see their roles in a different light, whether they can develop a clearer

understanding of what Paul Chewning, vice president for professional development at CASE, called “the complementarity of their knowledge.” Conor Seyle, a recent graduate of Texas A&M University, put the question even more succinctly: “Can the academy use expert knowledge to turn out ‘public experts?’”

The trouble, of course, is that civic engagement is too often perceived as being antithetical to teaching and research — the activities for which faculty are actually paid. “I spoke to the faculty senate about this two years ago,” Douglas Challenger recalled. “Afterwards, I got a whole flurry of e-mails and letters from faculty saying that I was sending an inconsistent signal. They were there to do research and teaching, and the thrust of civic engagement was exclusive of research and teaching. It’s an obstacle that I haven’t been able to overcome.”

An initial step might be to invent new categories and new models of thinking when it comes to teaching, offered Harris Sokoloff. “It seems to me that the old distinction between research, teaching, and service has to dissolve. Maybe one possibility for action is to begin to investigate ways in which research, teaching, and service are not separate activities.” Several participants agreed, offering a variety of improvements on the idea, including “co-research, co-teaching, and co-service,” and “discovery, learning, and engagement.” The key, they pointed out, was to conceptualize the relationship differently. Research, teaching, and service must be seen as activities carried out in *collaboration* with the public.

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*Harris Sokoloff  
University of Pennsylvania*

This discussion also carried over into the session on classroom education. According to the group, very little discovery, learning, and engagement actually occurs in most classrooms. According to Nancy Thomas, senior associate at the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, “our teaching does not adequately reflect what we now know about effective teaching and learning — mainly the importance of collaborative, dialogue-based, problem-based, and experiential pedagogy.”

Old methods and habits die hard. “Many teachers are still lecturing most or all of the time because, frankly, it’s the easiest thing to do,” Mike D’Innocenzo observed. “Active learning — the process of inquiry and discovery — takes more creativity, more initiative, and more planning.”

How, then, do we create a different kind of pedagogy, one that cultivates

not only traditional academic skills but also the essential arts of democracy? As William Sullivan pointed out, the key is to provide a supportive environment and structure for innovative practices. “Being a faculty member means being responsible for what happens in your classroom. And being creative about it. And constantly reinventing it. If people don’t do that, it’s because they often don’t see examples of other senior people in their groups doing that. But where they do, they will emulate it and it will grow.”

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Toward this end, the work group proposed that colleges and universities devote more energy and resources to teaching centers, workshops, stipends, release time, reward systems, mini-grants, dialogues and other forms of practical support for faculty innovation. The idea here is to cultivate an atmosphere that is receptive to new pedagogical approaches and that stimulates more collaborative and dialogue-based methodologies in the classroom.

Democratizing the classroom will have little impact, however, unless it is part of a larger strategy of creating a more democratic culture on campus and within the institution as a whole. Granted that colleges and universities can never be democratic in any true sense — based as they are on elaborate hierarchies and, in many cases, private ownership — what can be done to foster civic values on campus, to promote a culture of open-mindedness, civility, and tolerance of alternative points of view?

First, the institution has to be willing to confront the general lack of civility that exists among most faculty and administrators. Professors themselves can hardly be said to exemplify the traits of good citizenship, as Warren McCord of Auburn University pointed out. Often, he said, “they are no better equipped to engage in rational, civil discourse than students. I’ve seen emotionalism and as much irrationality from the faculty at our hearings as I have from the students.” Several others echoed the point. All too often, they noted, faculty meetings are reduced to squabbling over parking spaces.

Another persistent problem is the lack of interaction between the constituent parts of the university. Many institutions, particularly large research universities, are made up of what Billy Horton of Franklin Pierce College called “subsets of closed systems.” Students, faculty, administrators, support staff, trustees, and other members of the campus community seldom have mechanisms for ongoing dialogue among and between each other. Bringing everyone together tends to happen only at moments of celebration or crisis.

Finding mechanisms that bring people together in a spirit of openness and collaboration is essential to creating a more civic culture on campus. Betty Knighton spoke of the value of public forums, community meetings,

and ongoing deliberation on pressing campus issues. It is important to organize these activities on a regular basis — ”to build a habit of it,” as she put it — rather than stage them now and then or, worse yet, employ them as a form of crisis management.

Janetta Hammock of the American Council on Education stressed the need for a “culture of openness” on campus. Institutions need to bring more people to the table, engage their views, and actively work with them toward common goals. Hammock emphasized that “engaging” students or faculty or administrators has no real value unless it is done around an issue that has some practical relevance to the campus community. Ideally, dialogue should revolve around an issue that is critical to the mission of the institution.

An excellent way to build linkages with the larger community is for the institution to involve the public in these discussions. As Betty Knighton suggested, the ideal role for a college or university is to be a “hub” in the community, a place in which the public comes together, like a church, library, or other public venue. By serving this function, the school not only stimulates discussion and debate, it becomes an essential community resource. By making itself available in this way, it can begin to build relationships that will serve the interests of the community while at the same time informing the research, teaching, and service of the institution.

What colleges and universities need to get away from at all costs is the us-and-them attitude toward engagement, the sort aimed at “canvassing suggestions” or “soliciting input” or “firing questions at each other.” The key, in Katy Herriger’s words, is to “actually engage in discussion with the community. If you don’t do that — or if you just have three people with three points of view present what they have to say — people leave the forum as angry or upset or entrenched in their position as they were when they came.”

This process of bridging “town and gown” means confronting at least three major obstacles. First, because most academics are trained to write and think, not to teach or participate in community affairs, there is little appreciation for the importance of civic engagement within the walls of the institution. Second, people in the academy, just like the rest of American society, are retreating from the public sphere. Paul Gaston, provost at Kent State University, described it as a drift “from community to insularity, from the community theater to the home theater, from the backyard conversation to the e-mail chat.... Even faculty clubs are in trouble,” he said, “because those who used to have lunch at the faculty club are now sitting at their computers during the lunch hour and exchanging e-mails.” And third, faculty

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and administrators are increasingly dispersed geographically. They no longer live nearby, but commute in from many different directions. “In most situations,” Gaston said, “faculty live within a 50-mile radius of the institution.” As a result, it is difficult to engender a genuine sense of community, at least in the traditional sense.

Breaking down the walls that separate the university from the larger society involves strengthening ties not only with the community but also with elected officials. The work group examining the disconnect between higher education and government benefited from the participation not only of academics but several lawmakers. As they pointed out, the breach is rooted in a deep-seated lack of trust. Colleges and universities rarely approach them except to solicit money or otherwise ask for public support, they noted. As a result, many of them feel used by the higher education establishment.

The first step in narrowing the gap between educators and officeholders is, again, to develop relationships. According to New York state assemblyman Tom Di’Napoli, the relationships should be ongoing, not the sort called on only in moments of need or crisis. These relationships should also operate at many levels and involve many people. This ensures that they will survive even as people leave office or change roles within an institution.

Di’Napoli lamented the fact that “there is not enough replication of successful strategies.” As he saw it, a more systematic approach is needed, one that can be replicated within campuses and across campuses. “If you did it in a more systematic way, you could maximize the opportunities for connections between higher education communities and officeholders, not only for the material benefits of more money from the state, but just for the benefit of enhancing public policy and civic identity.”

What was left unaddressed by the final work group was how, and to what extent, improved relations between higher education and government might enhance the democratic process as a whole. It is not clear exactly how improved connections between, for example, university presidents and state lawmakers would lead to better policy-making. Communication, feedback, and mutual understanding — the qualities on which sound public policy are based — depend on more than just “good relations.” Ultimately, they depend on long-term relationships based on reciprocity and trust.

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## **A NEW PARADIGM FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

In the final plenary session, Keith Melville opened with the question: “What would it mean for themes of civic education to percolate through

the whole experience of higher education?” The question prompted a variety of responses, both specific and general. A recurring theme was the importance of fostering a democratic *culture* on campus. Civic engagement is a delicate thing that can flourish only under the proper conditions. Unless the commitment of the institution is wholehearted and new programs and policies are comprehensive, they will have little lasting impact.

“To make a visible difference,” said Ruth Messinger, president of American Jewish World Service, “a college or a multicollge university has to say, ‘we’re doing this at the administrative level, we’re doing this with a set of guidelines and goals and rewards for faculty. We’re going to make it something that has to happen on campus in such a way that everybody gets that habit and that experience and understands that it has broader applications in their lives.’”

Several participants also stressed the importance of grounding civic activities in issues of actual relevance to people. “Real engagement is about real issues and those need to be localized,” said Stephen Steinberg, executive director of the Penn National Commission on Society, Culture and Community. “Issues need to be made concrete and they need to have some prospect of real outcomes.” Clint Mayo, trustee of Gulf Coast Community College, called this an “overriding factor. The issues have to be real and meaningful,” he said, “otherwise it’s not going to work.”

This point was vividly illustrated by participants from Texas A&M, UPenn, Franklin Pierce College, and other schools that have held forums on the issue of alcohol. How the problem was framed, they noted, had a lot to do with how well it engaged the campus community. As a legal or national issue, drinking had little relevance to students; most of them are underage and therefore have no real voice in shaping alcohol policies. But when drinking was framed as a community problem or as an ethical issue — how and when to help someone who is drunk, for example — the question took on a whole different meaning.

Another theme that surfaced throughout the session was the importance of public deliberation on campus, not as a replacement for established practices but as a way of making them more coherent and meaningful. Nancy Thomas referred to this as one of the key findings from her work as director of the American Council on Education’s “Listening to Communities” initiative, a series of regional forums that explore higher education’s civic role. “What communities have told me over the last year,” she reported, “is that they would like to see deliberative skills as the basis for civic education, that we shouldn’t be setting up service-learning experiences without a lot of dialogue at the get-go. Similarly, we shouldn’t be establishing partner-

## **THE RURAL MEDICAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Ten years ago, the shortage of physicians in rural Alabama was posing a public health challenge. “They used to tell me, ‘We’re getting old and tired and we want some help,’” recalled John Wheat, an M.D. who teaches at the College of Community Health Sciences at The University of Alabama. They were concerned, he said, because the university had become a part of the problem instead of a potential solution. Of the 160 or 170 students admitted to the School of Medicine in Birmingham each year, no more than 5 were returning to practice in the communities. Moreover, very few rural high schoolers with an interest in the health professions were being accepted into the university in the first place.

With Dr. Wheat’s encouragement and help, the physicians organized the Rural Alabama Health Alliance to address the crisis through grant programs, public awareness campaigns, and other strategies. For his part, Dr. Wheat took the problem to the head of the medical school. While sympathetic to the problem, the dean balked at the idea of lowering the school’s admission standards just to accept more rural applicants.

“So I thought, I’m going to have to start working with high school kids,” Dr. Wheat remembered. “That’s how we started the Rural Health Scholars program. We would bring rural high school students after the eleventh grade to the university for the summer. They would get to do field trips to rural hospitals and doctors’ offices, and speakers from rural Alabama would come and speak with them.”

The initiative was very successful. “After the third year,” Dr. Wheat said, “the program was so popular throughout the state — both with the legislature and with the rural health practitioners — that the medical school said, ‘You know, John, you’re on to something. We need to respond to this. So we’re going to start a program to admit ten rural students a year to the School of Medicine.’”

As a result, the Rural Medical Scholars Program was born. Dr. Wheat described the program as an example of a different kind of civic engagement, the sort that serves the real needs of the community while at the same time preparing young professionals for an active role in public life following graduation.

ships in communities without first talking to communities in meaningful ways.”

Academics tend to be especially wary of buzzwords and catchphrases. This is only natural, perhaps, given that the profession is seized by new ones with depressing regularity. If words like “engagement,” “civic renewal,” and “public deliberation” turn out to be here today and gone tomorrow, like so many other academic fads, then we will have missed a great opportunity. It would mean we failed to address what David Mathews referred to as “the problem behind the problem.”

What words like these represent is a way of conceptualizing higher education that goes far beyond the conventional view. In most academic circles, civic education is narrowly defined in terms of knowledge about the democratic process. As we know, knowledge about government is important, but it is not a sufficient preparation for effective citizenship. Properly defined, civic education refers not only to information about government and the democratic process, but also to what it means to be an engaged participant in democratic life. To be an effective citizen, one must know not only how many houses of Congress there are, but also how to organize a sidewalk sale or get a streetlight fixed.

Teaching citizenship is just not a matter of imparting information, nor is it a matter of simply learning “civic skills,” such as community organizing or registering new voters. This approach is also inadequate because it relegates citizenship to the realm of acquired skills. A more enlightened approach, as Stephen Steinberg proposed, would be not to *teach* civic skills but to *practice* them. What we must remember, he insisted, is that “citizenship and civic engagement are not products. They are not deliverables. They are not something we, as educators, produce. They are a process in which we engage.”

In his closing remarks, David Mathews reflected on whether people in higher education can embrace this broader conception of civic engagement. The most difficult challenge facing the academy today, he said, is whether it can “develop a different paradigm, a different sense of itself and where it fits. The difficulty always is that the other paradigm is so powerful. It’s powerful because it’s unspoken; it’s unexamined. It frames and forces the conversation in a particular way.” Coming to terms with the problems of apathy and disengagement may hinge on adopting a different perspective, he suggested. “It’s a funny thing about solving problems. They are never solved. The resolution of problems

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occurs when people get a different sense of what they are. People don't solve problems — they get beyond them.”

This theme — the need for a new way of thinking about civic engagement — cropped up again and again throughout the seminar. Participants argued that statements about the need to *reform* higher education, or to *restore* its civic mission, or to *restate* its commitment to public life are all based on bringing back something that has been lost. It suggests that the solution to our current malaise can be found by looking into our past. “We need to break out of that problem/solution paradigm,” Stephen Steinberg charged, “the idea of illness-and-cure, decline-and-renewal, past-versus-present. What is needed instead, is a new way of understanding the current problem in higher education.


“To reform is not really the question,” said Kenneth Bedell of the Center for Democracy in the Delta. “It’s a matter of developing institutions that are relevant to an emerging system. I mean, it makes no sense to have a four-year institution prepare people to go back to the farm and then be good citizens. That kind of institution is silly in an Internet kind of world.”

The value of the seminar, according to statements made by several participants, is that it offered a glimpse of the “engaged university” of tomorrow, an institution in which civic education is “not an appendix,” in Bob Kingston’s words, “but an essential part of its practices.” “What I was enthused and engaged by from the opening session to the last comment,” said Amy Gibans-McGlashan, “was the recognition that we’re in changing times and we’re not trying to restore a golden past so much as look at something different.”

Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service, concurred. The enduring value of the seminar, she felt, was not that it offered a catalogue of shining examples or best practices, but rather that it raised open questions. There is a cultural tendency right now in academic circles to see themselves as above all this, she said. “I think there have been phenomenal suggestions over the course of the last two days about how to start to change that culture.”

As the meeting wound down, it was also clear that valuable new connections had been forged among and between the institutions represented. Far from being a mere talk-fest, the seminar opened up many avenues for possible collaboration in the future. By exchanging ideas and experiences — in the work groups, certainly, but also in the hallways, during coffee breaks, over lunch — participants gained not only a clearer grasp of the context and relevance of their work, but also

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an understanding of what their colleagues are doing in the field. Whether this will translate into a strengthened commitment to civic engagement on campus is impossible to say, of course, but it seems more than likely.

This is a defining moment for higher education. The steps it takes today will have a profound impact on our democratic prospects tomorrow. William Sullivan compared our current moment in history to the crisis presented by the Soviets when they launched *Sputnik* into orbit at the end of the Eisenhower era. “At the time,” he said, “Americans were terribly worried that we were losing our technological and scientific edge to the Soviets. That set in motion a huge amount of expenditure that expanded higher education for the good of many people.” It also had a profound intellectual effect by promoting a new kind of thinking about the methods and outcomes of education. “In a somewhat less grandiose way,” Sullivan concluded, “I wonder if we might be able to think of this as a moment when civic capacities and civic skills are equally crucial. We need to have the same kind of intellectual power generated around these purposes that was set in motion 40 years ago in science and technology.”

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