

Renewing the Civic Mission of American Higher Education

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THE SOCIAL PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

“Education Pays,” proclaims the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹ Earning a bachelor’s degree after high school, the bureau goes on to explain, increases earnings by 64% and nearly halves the rate of unemployment. Of course, other sources offer more modest estimates of returns. One compensation survey calculates the annual return on investment for a degree at a leading college to be 12.6% per year, or \$1.6 million over a lifetime. And yet, in a society of divided opinion about the varied higher education landscape, the one thing on which everybody agrees is that college produces quantifiable benefits for individuals. As the 2010 commencement season began, *New York Times* higher education writer Jacques Steinberg observed, “The idea that four years of higher education will translate into a better job, higher earnings and a happier life . . . has been pounded into the heads of schoolchildren, parents and educators.”²

In line with this common sense, the social benefit of higher education is commonly attributed to the collective effect of individual returns. That calculation reflects standard economic logic. College becomes an engine of social change when members of previously disadvantaged groups achieve greater educational access and then become more productive. As Barack Obama said in his 2010 State of the Union Address, “In the 21st century, the best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education.”³

Yet higher education has vital public purposes beyond aggregated individual economic benefits. Colleges and universities should be forums for invention and social innovation that benefit *all* of us. They should be repositories of culture as well as sources for cultural creativity. And they must educate students, giving them not only the skills they need to be successful

What Is College For?

The Public Purpose of Higher Education

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personally, but also the values, ideals, and civic virtues on which American democracy depends.

For a variety of reasons, the public purposes of higher education, especially those pertaining to civic education, have, at most institutions, fallen by the wayside. Some past rationales for civic education are less applicable today. The composition of the faculty has changed, as a result of different incentives in the hiring and promotion process. Presidents and other top administrators are expected to be winners in a competitive, consumer-driven higher education market rather than shepherds of character and ethical growth among their students. Demands on colleges and universities for specialized scholarly excellence and demographic expansion have displaced efforts that lack vocal stakeholders. A flourishing multiplicity of worthy but uncoordinated agendas has crowded out higher education's commitment to the common good.

THE WHAT AND WHY OF CIVIC EDUCATION

The ongoing erosion of civic concerns within American higher education is alarming and dangerous. We live in a democratic society facing serious challenges, domestic and international. Global political and economic instability, a communications revolution that has undermined old principles of information freedom and control, damage to the climate and threats of ecological collapse, peril in the supplies of food, energy, medicine, and water in many parts of a highly interconnected world, challenges to public education at all levels, and growing social and economic inequality at home and abroad all contribute to a cacophonous national and transnational discourse.

Many of the current sources of contention originate from stresses that have been part of American democracy from the beginning. Our Declaration of Independence promises the right to liberty and also to the pursuit of happiness. But what if my liberty infringes on your happiness—when, for example, I expose to the world information you would rather keep private? How much economic inequality is consistent with the nation's promise of human equality, and how much regulation of economic inequality is consistent with the nation's guarantees of individual rights? Do my fundamental rights include the freedom to degrade nature to the detriment of others' pursuit of their happiness?

Grappling with such questions requires powerful, multifaceted civic education. Civic education, at its best, begins with the acquisition of fundamental knowledge of the U.S. Constitution and American history. It encompasses an active interest in current events and persistent public problems, local, national, and global—and a disciplined capacity to analyze them. Because value judgments are essential aspects of civic competence, it encourages reflection

on the meaning of fairness, social justice, freedom, and equality, conceived as both democratic ideals and lived commitments. Finally, civic education instills a willingness to take effective action regarding matters of public concern—not merely to understand them. Broadly conceived as a tripod that facilitates thought, judgment, and action concerning questions of public interest, civic education must be central to the educational efforts of many different institutions, including colleges and universities, in all their various programs, departments, and schools.

Institutions of higher education should help their students focus and elevate national conversations about enduring questions. Colleges and universities should act as wellsprings of republican virtue. Colleges are communities, and most colleges are communities that include young people. They are a natural place for citizens to learn values beyond their own personal welfare, to see themselves as part of a society of mutual rights and responsibilities. They should be settings in which engagement with questions concerning justice and goodness is essential to daily routines. All who are shareholders in these institutions—from boards of trustees and governments to the students themselves and their parents—should expect and demand that they will help cultivate an active, responsible, and informed citizenry.

The nuts and bolts of civic education are a staple of K–12 schooling. And so they should be. Despite that, many college students would have trouble passing the U.S. Naturalization Exam. One survey reports, for example, that a third of college graduates do not know that the Bill of Rights prohibits the establishment of a national religion, and about the same percentage believe that the president alone has the authority to declare war.⁴ Teaching the basics of citizenship in college is a bit like teaching grammar: Everyone agrees that K–12 schools should do it, but colleges must do it as well. Civic education is too important to be left only to the first two stages of education.

Above and beyond ensuring that college graduates know the basics of American institutions, colleges and universities have a broad responsibility for the future of citizenship. They have become the central switching stations of life in the United States and other democratic societies. Free societies will not thrive unless colleges, graduate schools, and professional schools understand that the civic health of the nation is one of their central responsibilities.⁵ Sadly, however, civic education is too often marginalized at tertiary institutions. Expertise drives educational programming at the college level, and the specialization of the faculty has left citizenship as nobody's specialty. As a result, civics are easily belittled as an unworthy utilization of a research faculty, or shunned as a form of nationalistic indoctrination alien to the skeptical, feethinking academic world. The internationalization of both the student and faculty bodies has also made any hint of patriotic pride vulnerable to deconstruction as American-centric arrogance. Faculty autonomy, faculty allegiance to their disciplines, and the hands-off sanctity of the classroom at

many institutions, especially the more elite, all further weigh against commitment to any common learning experience for all students or thematic coordination across the curriculum. No institution would explicitly oppose civic education, and yet many find it convenient to avoid.

In addition, in these times of deep ideological division, civic idealism risks politicization. The dual ideals of personal liberty and human equality have always evolved in tension with one another, but political advocates tend to stress one without acknowledging the importance of the other. In this way, calls for civic idealism in college can be stand-ins for both conservative and liberal political agendas. Worse, a call for the restoration of civic values to higher education that is balanced even slightly to the left or the right of center can be caricatured by the other side as proselytizing an extreme social agenda, either for socialism or for unfettered free markets. Colleges, worried about charges of political bias, and already filled with divisive social controversies to manage, have a pacific rationale for leaving civic education aside.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Yet colleges and universities, whether corporately public or private, all exist to serve public purposes. Accordingly, they should be held accountable for preparing students to be competent citizens, domestically and globally. This responsibility need not detract from other educational goals. It may be different in kind from the objective of imparting knowledge and skills for further education and career enhancement. However, there is no zero-sum, competitive game here. Pursuit of one goal need not diminish efforts to realize another. Quite the reverse is the case. What is essential is for colleges and universities to acknowledge that they will not have fulfilled their public obligations simply by adding to the national stock of human capital, no matter how well they achieve that goal. They must recognize a direct responsibility for the civic learning of their students, spread across the entire curriculum. Only in that way can they meet their full responsibility to contribute to the well-being of our society.

Civic education has important academic dimensions, but it does not end at the walls of the classrooms. Of course, almost every college president hands student “public service,” but too often institutional support for it is limited to community service and volunteering. Rarely do universities encourage government service, either civil or military, or seek to engage students in local or state politics. Colleges and universities must help address our great national problems: the deficiencies of our health care and education systems, the degradation of our natural environment, the decline of our housing and physical infrastructure, the venality of our political system, the

public consequences of our unstable financial system, and growing alienation from the very idea of government. In doing so, they will avow their responsibility to model at the institutional level the civic engagement they seek to nurture in their students.

To teach civic responsibilities, institutions must practice civic responsibility. They could, and should, do far more than they currently do.

OVERVIEW OF THIS CHAPTER

Before proposing remedies, we shall review how colleges and universities lost their sense of civic mission over the past century and a half, even as they have grown and prospered in almost every other way. Then we shall turn to the reactive forces over the past century—various movements and public debates that attempted to pull universities back to their civic roots.

Armed with an understanding of how higher education got where it is today, we then focus on the conditions needed to improve civic education in colleges and universities. As we have said, we believe that effective civic education must simultaneously involve students’ capacities for thinking intellectually, for making moral judgments, and for taking actions that bridge ideas and norms. This is what we shall refer to as the tripod of civic education and we shall suggest this tripod as a framework for any effort to enliven civic learning. Colleges and universities too often view themselves as agencies of ideas alone, teaching students a version of the life of the mind or inducting them into a profession that is morally hollow or abstracted from the dilemmas of the “real world.” As part of their mission to invent, preserve, disseminate, and apply knowledge, colleges and universities must commit themselves to discovering their own civic missions. Doing so is not peripheral, but rather essential to their educational effectiveness.

We offer, finally, three proposals to reanimate civic education. First is the heretical thought that general education and core requirements are *not* the right way to make the case to students for moral and civic responsibility. Schools, programs, departments, and majors are the centers of the academic enterprise. It is there that students must be engaged in civic learning. Second, given all the pressures for students to focus on short-term results, the single key goal of civic education should be to get students to focus on the big problems of the world, problems beyond single human lives or any individual’s home community. The way to create a better world is for institutions of higher education to enlighten students to their own responsibilities and agency. Finally, we believe colleges and universities must become more self-conscious and deliberate in their modeling of civic virtue. They must teach and model that in all that they do.

We are aware that in both substance and style our argument is grounded in normative judgments for which we offer relatively little empirical support and none that is quantitative. We accept that our posture may be less persuasive in some quarters because it is ultimately grounded in morals. By candidly presenting our belief that ethics are inherent in all educational enterprises and are best and most honestly served when made explicit, we hope to provoke thinking and talk about what it is we want and expect from a sector of American society that is vital to all of us. Our goal is not necessarily consensus. It is consideration and conversation that we seek.

CIVIC COMMITMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION: A SLOW AND INADVERTENT DECLINE

From the Principles of Humanity to the Decline of Moral Philosophy

American schooling was never just about the three R's—'readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic. The founders believed that civic and moral values were important to the survival of imperiled democracy, so important that "values education" was from the beginning a job for the state and not something to be left to parents alone. John Adams's words in the Massachusetts Constitution (1780) elegantly explain that school, and even higher education, were most certainly about personal development as well as useful skills:

Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and grammar schools in the towns; to encourage private societies and public institutions, rewards and immunities, for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.⁶

In Massachusetts, at least, humanity, benevolence, charity, and even "good humor" are still on the books as central to the educational mission of all institutions.

The Roman republic was a model for the United States, and the founders drew on Roman historians and orators for inspiration. The grammar schools of the early American republic used Livy and Cicero as basic texts, teaching civic idealism and basic literacy in one fell swoop. Noah Webster, writing in 1790, trumpeted schools' obligation to instill civic-republican ideals:

It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.⁷

Civic purposes echo through the founding documents of early American colleges, through Horace Mann's *Annual Reports*, and through countless Fourth of July and commencement addresses delivered to American students. Civic education was taken for granted as a basic purpose of education, not isolated as a separate subject. To be schooled entailed coming to embrace the common values of the American people. The *McGuffey Readers* and other texts that were widely used across the nation during the 19th century taught generations of Americans about the Constitution, American history, and the values associated with patriotism.

For those relatively few Americans who continued their education in college, civic learning was encompassed within the subject of moral philosophy, a capstone class, usually taught by the college president, and required of all graduating seniors. Debating clubs and literary societies used theses on civil government as opportunities for practice in public speaking and disputation.

The erosion of civic education began after the Civil War, with the ascendency of science in the academy and, after the 1870s, with the emergence of the research universities. Part of the problem, then as now, was allocation of limited teaching hours: as new subjects entered the curriculum, some older ones had to be downscaled or dropped. In addition, science was thought to be in fundamental tension with civics. Once conceived as a means for finding and understanding evidence of God's designs, science post Darwin became increasingly specialized and was stripped of religious and moral premises. Scientific developments fragmented college curricula and relegated moral philosophy to marginal status within departments of philosophy. As scientific knowledge developed along deeper but narrower lines of investigation, possibilities faded for instructing graduates in a unified approach to social problems and citizens' responsibilities to address those problems. As late as 1895, moral philosophy, taught by the college president, was still required of all seniors at Amherst College; by 1905, it was but a single offering in the Department of Philosophy.⁸

If civic education waned as moral philosophy became optional, two other related developments also contributed to its decline: the professionalization of the academic disciplines, and the emergence of the "imperial faculty," acting as relatively autonomous agents and only weakly allied to their institutions.⁹

Academic Professionalization

Professionalization in the academic disciplines was of a piece with the growth of advanced training and specialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. New institutions oriented toward research were established, and others evolved. Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago led the way for older colleges such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Michigan. Increasingly, their faculty members were likely to hold a Ph.D. and to be engaged in scholarly research and publication. Most likely, too, they were members of a professional association, representing their particular field of academic pursuit.

Professionalization splintered once unified interest in social problems. For example, problems of poverty concerned different specialists differently. Sociologists might study the neighborhood origins of poverty, while economists and statisticians might investigate ways to measure it. In the process of subdivision, poverty ceased to be taught as a shared concern of all citizens.

As part of a further process of subdivision, social *science* came to be recognized as distinct from social *work*. Social science, being "scientific," pertained to scholarly study. In the ideal at least, its impartiality was assured through divorce from advocacy and social action. Social work, on the other hand, pertained to the administration and provision of social welfare services, and inevitably fell lower on the scale of academic respectability. As Charles William Eliot said on the occasion of his inauguration as Harvard president in 1869, "Truth and right are above utility in all realms of thought and action."¹⁰ That pithy sentence explains a lot about today's academic pecking order. Traditionally female service professions—nursing, education, and social work—were less academically respected than the study of the underlying principles of the same areas—for example, medicine, psychology, and sociology.

By 1920, the University of Chicago included both a Department of Sociology and a School of Social Service Administration, which had grown out of the earlier Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. This movement toward academic professionalization and specialization is, of course, the way universities became great engines of discovery and invention. But with disciplines and professions parsed into ever more narrowly defined areas of

expertise, separating science from service and theory from practice, institutions of higher learning became less committed to the advancement of broadly defined public goods, such as citizenship.

The Imperial Faculty

Faculty members were empowered by their expertise. Their allegiance and deference increasingly went to their professional peers, who taught the same subject to other students, rather than to their institutional colleagues, who taught other subjects to the same students. As their affiliations shifted from educational institutions to academic guilds, faculty members identified themselves more with national professional communities than with the local residential communities in which their institutions were located. With this cosmopolitanism came a related shift in professional identity: professors' disciplinary affiliations trumped their status as teachers. As this occurred, research, publication, and national reputation became more important to professors' advancement than their skill and devotion as educators.

At research universities, attention to teaching fell the farthest as research productivity became the dominant value. Provoked by dissatisfied students and families, and challenged by 4-year colleges, these institutions vocally reasserted their interest in pedagogy, establishing teaching institutes, institutionalizing small seminars, and generally devoting more attention to the undergraduate classroom experience. But good pedagogy is more technical and less holistic than good teaching. It pertains to the effective transmission of specialized knowledge more than to overall responsibility for students' moral and civic development. Ironically, therefore, the emergence, under pressure, of teaching centers reinforced narrow conceptions of the professoriate's responsibility for the overall development of students, which belonged to no one in particular, certainly not to any particular group within the faculty.

As national networks of academics developed across institutions of higher education, faculty members gained increasing power in relation to presidents and trustees. If they had sufficient professional prestige within their disciplines, faculty members could—and did—move from one institution to another if they were displeased with academic administrators. Donors, trustees, and college and university administrators, who once had wielded great power over their institutions, increasingly respected academic freedom and deferred to the wishes of the faculty. Increasing autonomy and power reinforced faculty tendencies to specialize and to devote their efforts to research rather than teaching and service. With no incentives for either professors or universities to cultivate humane values in students, civic commitments quietly faded into the din of the ongoing battles for scholarly excellence.

Science Triumphant

These trends, already evident before the two world wars, became more pronounced after 1945, when the report of Vannevar Bush, *Science, the Endless Frontier*, focused national attention on the importance of scientific research. Universities, rather than the national laboratories that existed in European countries, were identified as the most effective venues for scientific invention and discovery.¹¹ Federal funds for academic research increased rapidly. Today, every top institution of higher education benefits from federal research funds. Though technically awarded to institutions, funding for research rests on the knowledge, skills, and prestige of faculty investigators, who can take their research funding with them if they move between institutions. Dependence on research funds thus reinforced developing patterns of deference and power within colleges and universities, ushering in what would become a system of national “star” faculty and boosting the standing of institutions that secured the most research funding. By 1969, sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman could write of “an academic revolution”—not the student unrest of the period, but the overwhelming power of the faculty to set institutional direction. Colleges, which had once been “pillars of the locally established church, political order, and social conventions,” now existed in a hierarchically differentiated system of institutions that resembled a snake-like procession.¹²

Social and Scholarly Progress, Civic Regress

The ascendancy of science had a second and independent effect on the teaching of civic and moral values in higher education. Science became the model for the ideal in academic scholarship—objective, unbiased, universal, lacking in moral direction, and usually detached from direct involvement in the world. Scholarship would be regarded with suspicion if a judgment of its quality were justified by its normative implications. The absence of (overtly stated) values became a signal of academic purity. Academic prizes and faculty appointments were awarded dispassionately, on the basis of academic quality. Awards were given for the recipients’ acts of genius, regardless of their human qualities. The ideal for the social sciences followed suit—qualitative research became less fashionable as reproducible, quantifiable, opinion-free research results became the standard to which young scholars were held. In the humanities, where the best work speaks to the nature of the human spirit, the demand for fair, unbiased assessment criteria is yet an unfinished project.

At the same time, the expansion of graduate schools (including graduate professional schools) turned some of the old, prestigious, and selective

institutions into top-heavy “university colleges,” in which the undergraduate programs served *de facto* as prep schools for graduate and professional education.¹³ With the exception of a few institutions that are able to sustain distinctive niches, all colleges and universities lined up, one behind the other, according to rank, with the most venerable of the university colleges leading the pack. Today’s *US News* and other college league tables merely elaborate and quantify a pecking order that was commonly understood decades ago.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, American higher education continued the trend begun after the Civil War toward specialized expertise and professionalized faculty. Of course, in spite of the dominance of the faculty, notable changes did occur in the power structure. Donors grew in importance, creating tensions with the power and prerogatives of faculty members.¹⁴ In some instances, administrators were torn between the priorities of donors on the one hand, and the faculty on the other. In pursuit of the funds necessary for preeminence, too many colleges and universities failed to sustain the missions they continued rhetorically to embrace.

Higher Education as a National Priority

In pre-industrial America, colleges and universities were elite institutions. Their social role was relatively minor and geographically localized. Before the Civil War, denominationalism and local boosterism encouraged the founding of many small colleges across the expanding territory of the United States, each with a program that responded to the demands of the local population.

The first Morrill Act of 1862 provided an initial stimulus to practical curricula at colleges across the nation. The government offered land grants to colleges that would teach “agriculture and the mechanic arts” (not excluding “military tactics”) in order “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”¹⁵ This expansion radically extended American higher education, enlarging its orbit to include farming and mining and industrial engineering. Parts of American higher education became unrecognizably strange to scholars visiting from Oxford and Cambridge. On a trip to the United States in 1914 to lecture on the foundations of mathematics, Bertrand Russell was astonished to find at the University of Wisconsin that “when any farmer’s turnups go wrong, they send a professor to investigate the failure scientifically.”¹⁶

In the 20th century, colleges and universities became major structural forces in American society. They develop and disseminate the knowledge that drives the economy. Through both their admissions process and their educational programs, they sort people into categories and match them to their adult jobs and social standing. Through most students attend college

near home, some colleges are national magnets, and the force of their attraction permanently alters their local demography.

Both globalization and technological advances heightened the economic value of higher education's outputs, both a skilled population and the inventions and ideas that make them productive. The economic importance of higher education spurred student demand, and in order to make those economic benefits available to previously excluded populations, Congress greatly increased federal financial aid. All these forces aligned to drive both institutional and enrollment growth. There were 2,004 institutions of higher education in 1960, 3,152 in 1980, and 4,084 in 2000.¹⁷ Student enrollment, only 2,101,962 in 1951, reached 4,145,065 in 1961, then 12,096,895 in 1980, and 15,312,289 by 2000.¹⁸ Ever more explicit and narrow vocational aims became increasingly common. According to the U.S. Department of Education, just one-third of all bachelor's degrees awarded in 2007 were in liberal arts and sciences; all the humanities together made up less than 10% of undergraduate degrees. More than 21% were in business, 6.9% in education, and 6.7% in the health professions.¹⁹ By 2010, the president of the United States was calling for every American to complete at least 1 year of "higher education or career training."²⁰

Somewhat paradoxically, the explosion in numbers of institutions of higher education resulted in institutional homogenization, not differentiation. Some specialized institutions evolved—excellent undergraduate colleges focusing on business or nursing or library science, for example. But the overall force of competition among colleges and universities was to make them more expansive and therefore more similar. Most, and especially the large institutions in which most students study, have tended to follow the vocational and professional demands of their constituents. Eventually, other great national trends and events would dramatize what was lost in dividing higher education into so many useful, practical, but unconnected academic colonies.

REACTIONS AGAINST THE "ACADEMIC REVOLUTION"

Throughout the 20th century, civic ideals have been reasserted in a variety of ways. We shall focus on four examples: general education, the student movement of the 1960s, debates about the canon, and service learning. None of our examples played out in the same way at every institution they affected, and their strongest proponents might be surprised to find them cast as joined in any common purpose. But each of these developments was born of a sense that the fragmented system of higher education was failing to serve some larger civic need of American society. We believe they help illustrate the

degree to which, still today, postsecondary education faces a similar failure of uniting purpose, and for some of the same reasons. Though none comprises a template we would recommend for adoption, all can prompt reflection on what might be done to enhance civic education today.

General Education

The three paradigmatic models for general education were developed at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard. Though each responded to distinctive original circumstances, all were meant to advance civic values and to defend liberal learning in the face of demographic diversification and academic professionalization. From these three progenitors, general education took a variety of forms in the 20th century as colleges copied each other's models and refined their own in response to social changes throughout the century.

Columbia. General education began at Columbia in 1919, with the creation of a yearlong course intended to introduce students to "the insistent problems of the present."²¹ Coupled with a course on "Peace Issues" (which replaced a course on "War Issues" that had been created in 1917), "Contemporary Civilization" was designed in part to bring academic dispassion to the wrenching experience of the Great War. In a larger sense, as Daniel Bell noted later in a report to the faculty, general education was also intended to safeguard undergraduate liberal education from pressures for earlier professional preparation.²² Subsequently in the late 1930s, it was combined with a humanities sequence that had grown out of a "great books" general honors course, to form the Columbia core curriculum.

Faculty allegiance to liberal education combined with demographic changes in New York City early in the 20th century formed the backdrop for the Columbia program. The crucial step toward general education had been taken in 1916, when Columbia dropped Latin as an entrance requirement—making admission far easier for newly arrived European immigrants, many of them Jewish. The public schools most immigrants attended did not teach Latin, though it was still a staple of independent school curricula. The general education curriculum thus served both intellectual and social purposes. It enhanced the cultural capital of entering students, who no longer had a common precollege educational foundation while also addressing widespread anti-Semitism. Columbia College Dean Frederick P. Keppel noted that Jews had above average "intellectual curiosity," which meant their presence in "the classroom was distinctly desirable." He wanted course work that could ensure the "cosmopolitanism" taken for granted among Columbia's traditional applicants.²³

By the mid-1940s, general education at Columbia had evolved into three 2-year courses in science, the social sciences, and the humanities, intended to introduce entering students "to a comprehensive view of what goes to the making of an intelligent citizen of the world."²⁴ It has continued to evolve to this day.

To the extent that Columbia's experiment in general education represented an effort to maintain older cultural standards amidst a changed demographic and social situation, it bears continued scrutiny. As it did 100 years ago, America is again experiencing significant immigration. Now as then, immigrants first segregate themselves, and over a few decades integrate, adopt English as their first language, and intermarry. And then, as now, none of this happened painlessly. Writing in the *Washington Post*, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Harvard professor Robert Putnam recently compared these two periods, noting one important difference.

We native-born Americans are doing less than our great-grandparents did to welcome immigrants. . . . To improve their integration into our American community, we should . . . invest in public education, including civics education and higher education. During the first half of the 20th century, schools were critical to preparing children of immigrants for success and fostering a shared national identity.²⁵

Helping immigrants gain a shared national identity is not a unifying public purpose across institutions of higher learning today. Very much in evidence at some community colleges, it is virtually absent at the more elite 4-year colleges. The Columbia experiment may demonstrate how short-sighted that is.

Chicago. At the University of Chicago, general education was embodied in a series of shifting plans for organizing the first 2 years of college work. Robert Maynard Hutchins became president in 1929, and used his office to decry the vocational trends in higher education and to promote the "great books." During the early years of his presidency a "new plan" required students to pass five examinations, in physical sciences, biological science, social science, humanities, and English literature, before moving into more specialized work for the last two undergraduate years. (The first four of these examination areas corresponded to the four divisions into which Hutchins structured the university's 72 departments.) Hutchins wished to prepare students for these examinations through required courses built exclusively around classical texts. The faculty dissented, insisting that the "great books" be supplemented by more contemporary writings, so Hutchins's dream of a purely classical curriculum never came to pass at Chicago.²⁶

Deeply influenced by the humanist philosopher Mortimer Adler (who had participated in the general honors course that preceded the humanities core at Columbia), Hutchins saw general education as a means for introducing students to the "Great Conversations" of humanity.²⁷ Though the Chicago practice never fully matched the vision, Hutchins famously laid out his rationale in *The Higher Learning in America*. Only a few colleges, such as St. John's College in Annapolis, executed that program in virtually its pure form.

In Hutchins's view, "general education is education for everybody" and is of just as much value to those not intent on advanced study as to those who are. General education was to be integrated into institutions of higher education, making the whole university or college more than a federation of distinct schools and departments overseen by a common administration. It was part of a lifelong educational process, extending beyond what is taught or studied in school, intended to nurture the intellectual and practical virtues—essentially the capacity to think rationally and act morally. Leaving the more practical lessons of experience to life beyond academe, general education was, in Hutchins's view, intended "to draw out the elements of our common human nature." Taking direct aim at people who believed education should reflect the political, economic, social, and intellectual changes occurring in society, Hutchins insisted: "Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same."²⁸

Hutchins's rationale for general education has always been controversial. It was pointedly at odds with the professional specialization of the University of Chicago faculty—and the faculties of many other colleges. Ph.D. programs train experts, not generalists, and faculties everywhere have to be constructed from the scholars produced by doctoral programs.

Even more fundamentally, the spirit of great books and great questions was basically at odds with the practicality and flexibility characteristic of American education. But its aspirations to universality and timelessness are worth contemplating still. Such intellectual idealism is never out of place. The job of higher education should be to lift the vision of its students toward the highest achievements of the life of the mind. Then again, the pragmatism of the American spirit cannot and should not simply be dismissed or ignored as inappropriate. Especially today with so many more upwardly mobile students attending college, general education has to provide a bridge between the life of the mind and the life of commerce and careers. No broadly attractive program can be credible without such linkages.

Harvard. General education at Harvard was organized along a tripartite plan similar to that at Columbia. It was meant to prepare students "for those common spheres which, as citizens and heirs of a joint culture, they will share with others."²⁹

At Harvard, general education was born in the midst of World War II, during the presidency of James B. Conant. One of Conant's major ambitions was to advance "meritocracy" by admitting students from a wider range of schools and regions, and to make their attendance financially possible through a program of "National Scholarships." General education was intended to provide the newly diverse Harvard student body with common knowledge. In Conant's view, "a set of common beliefs is essential for the health and vigor of a free society. . . . The future citizens we desire to educate should have strong loyalties and high civic courage. Such emotional attitudes are in part the product of a common knowledge and a common set of values."³⁰

Once again, general education was meant to counter curricular fragmentation and vocational specialization. According to Harvard's report, *General Education in a Free Society* (commonly known as the Red Book), concentrations or majors had become little more than "a kind of higher vocational training." This was a result of modern life in a democracy, the Red Book maintained. Since "the moneyed class is less strong and almost all young people have to prepare themselves to make a living," the report argued, the aim of general education was to establish "the common view of life" no longer available through common subject matter or methods.³¹ General education looked to the student's "life as a responsible human being and citizen" and to certain "traits of mind and ways of looking at man and the world" that transcended vocational and professional specialization. "The heart of the problem of a general education," Conant said when he launched the educational review in January 1943, "is the continuance of the liberal and humane tradition. Neither the mere acquisition of information nor the development of special skills and talents can give the broad basis of understanding which is essential if our civilization is to be preserved."³²

Harvard's general education program was the product of a time when the country was engaged in a popular war, widely regarded as being fought for the preservation of civilization. The faculty felt they could help the future by educating a citizenry that would not allow such a global catastrophe ever to happen again. Today, though America has no shortage of wars, opinion is sharply divided about whether the country is, on balance, doing the world more good or ill by fighting them. Whether colleges and universities can help in reconstructing a shared sense of direction, a common faith in the integrity of our national priorities, and wide mutual respect among people of different backgrounds and perspectives remains to be seen. But the aims of general education at Harvard, as originally constituted, may underscore the vital importance of having institutions of higher education devote themselves at least in part to defining and debating of what a "common view of life" might consist today.

Before turning from a discussion of general education to the student movements of the 1960s, one last observation about Harvard seems warranted. As

the spirit of the Red Book faded, its curriculum faded, too. Harvard has adopted two general education curricula since then, one in the late 1970s and one in 2005. Both share the structure of the original Harvard general education program: students must select from a set of courses specifically designed for nonspecialists, and their selections must touch a variety of disciplinary categories. But both curricula lack a unifying value system, beyond the value of being "generally," not narrowly, educated. They have both operated in practice as distribution systems. Professors have not been uninterested in teaching in these programs. But their interest has not been about coming together around shared educational goals. Rather, participation has ensured that their particular academic disciplines receive proportional representation in the distribution of the centrally controlled resources; for example, fundraising efforts, faculty lines, and teaching assistantships, which accompany their contributions to the program.

A compelling example of the failure of such a constrained-choice distributional curriculum to address the civic aims of general education can be seen in Harvard's newest general education curriculum, though the problem is common across many institutions built around curricular distribution systems. The single most popular course at Harvard, as at many campuses, is the introductory economics course. Though it does satisfy a general education requirement, many students enroll in it either as the first course in the economics major, or as what they hope will be useful pre-business preparation.

This is unfortunate. It has been known for some time that studying a standard introduction to rational-choice economics actually weakens those moral and civic virtues with which students arrive at college. In a 1993 paper, three Cornell economists studied the behavior of students before and after taking a standard economics course, which emphasized self-interest as the basis for rational choice. Their study demonstrated that undergraduates were less likely to make altruistic decisions, and also less likely to act honestly when confronted with moral dilemmas, after taking introductory economics.³³ A civic mission for general education cannot be taken seriously when the single most popular general education course tends to make students care less, not more, about the welfare of their fellow human beings.

The post-general education situation at Harvard underscores yet another point that must be contemplated if the civic mission of American higher education is to be renewed. Distribution requirements facilitate student choice. That pleases students and frees faculty members from justifying why some classes are deemed important just because, to put it plainly, some higher authority has decided they are "good for you." The popularity of distribution requirements as a replacement for general education is part and parcel of faculty disengagement from education as the primary coordinate of their academic roles.

The Student Movement

If the three paradigmatic examples of general education discussed above represented top-down efforts to institutionalize civic ideals in undergraduate education, the student movement of the late 1960s was in part a bottom-up effort to do much the same thing. Remembered mostly for its association with national movements—the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement and, a bit later, the women's movement—the student movement was at its core an expression of the alienation widely felt among young people toward injustice and commercialization in American society. The target was the university itself. Students' feelings about the university were complex. The conjunction of a military draft and student deferments made universities seem at once both sanctuaries and prisons. Students' frustration with both the politics of the war and their own uncertain futures put the publicly significant acts of a college or university under close moral scrutiny. The institution came to represent everything about American society that the students wanted to change. Thus the student movement, despite its radically anti-authoritarian agenda and tactics, sprang from a concern not dissimilar from that which had inspired the general education movement: a sense that colleges and universities were offering an education that was useful and practical, but also shallow and soulless.

"Welcome to lines, bureaucracy, and crowds," proclaimed the Berkeley student newspaper in 1965, at the time of the free speech movement. Addressing new students arriving on campus, the *Daily Californian* continued: "Lesson number one is not to fold, spindle, or mutilate" your "IBM card."³⁴ The free speech movement had been triggered the year before when students defied university rules regulating political activity, leafleting, and fundraising. When one former student was arrested, a huge crowd immobilized for 32 hours the police cruiser in which he was to be transported, while many students climbed onto the hood to speak. Within a few months, Mario Savio, one of the movement's leaders, was able to rally over a thousand students to take part in a sit-in at the main administration building. The immediate action was brought to an end when the police arrested 773 students and supporters, but the events in Berkeley sparked student action at campuses across the country.

The Port Huron Statement, issued by the leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962, presaged the roots of the rebellions that would occur later in the decade. "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit," announced the statement's authors. They then went on to lament that their experience in universities had not brought "moral enlightenment." Instead, the SDS leaders claimed: "Our professors and

administrators sacrifice controversy to public relations; their curriculums change more slowly than the living events of the world; their skills and silence are purchased by investors in the arms race; passion is called unscholarly. The questions we might want raised—what is really important? can we live in a different and better way? if we wanted to change society, how would we do it?—are not thought to be questions of a 'fruitful, empirical nature,' and thus are brushed aside."³⁵ Running to 45 pages, the Port Huron Statement concluded with a critique of the ways in which "the university is located in a permanent position of social influence" and must therefore be the launching pad to redirect political, social, and economic policies toward the emergence of a truly democratic society.

Owing to its anti-authoritarian rhetoric, and its visible successes in changing campus cultures, the student movement is generally associated with the political left. But another student movement also emerged during the 1960s: the conservative movement that founded Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and issued "The Sharon Statement." That manifesto was formulated during a meeting at the home of William F. Buckley in Sharon, Connecticut, during the summer of 1960. Even though its authors were also "housed in universities," their call to arms said nothing about higher education, instead asserting principles compatible with the group's anticommunist and artistat agenda. Only two pages long, the statement asserted the responsibility of "the youth of America to affirm certain eternal truths." These were centered in "the individual's use of his God-given free will," which required the government to limit itself to protecting individual liberty and ensuring internal order, national defense, and the administration of justice. In addition, the statement argued that "the market economy . . . is the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government" and insisted "that we will be free only so long as the national sovereignty of the United States is secure" against international Communism.³⁶

After the Sharon meeting, the founders of YAF worked with determination and persistence, mostly at the grassroots level, to move the Republican Party to the right. They were defeated when Barry Goldwater lost the presidential election in 1964, but the movement's efforts ultimately bore fruit when Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980. With that victory the conservative branch of the student movement achieved the long-delayed, indirect effect of reviving the earlier movement for general education—this time in a less academic, wider and more cultural and political form.

Debating "The Canon"

Questions concerning whether there is a single canon that should form the core of college curricula, and if so, of what it should consist, led to the

so-called culture wars that began in 1987. The immediate catalyst was publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. As James Atlas noted in 1990, writing for the *New York Times*, "Bloom's eloquent polemic" was "clearly a phenomenon."³⁷ In a few short months, it had sold half a million copies, and it remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 31 weeks—an astonishing run for a book whose argument dealt with the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger and other philosophers who are not household names in the United States.

Bloom's book was unabashedly elitist. In beginning his argument, Bloom, who was a philosopher at the University of Chicago, confessed that his "sample" (the term was placed in quotation marks as a token of his disdain for social scientific investigations) consisted entirely of students from the 20 or 30 best universities—those who, in his view, "most need education."³⁸ Even among such talented young people, Bloom maintained, a culture dominated by pop music and Walt Disney had created a generation of self-absorbed, sex-crazed zombies. The erosion of the humanities, especially great books curricula, meant that the universities offered little in the way of correction. Dominated by postmodernists, feminists, and relativists, university teaching only reinforced the pervasive mindlessness of the young.

Though Bloom denied being a political conservative, the worst excesses of the student movement figured significantly in his narrative, including an armed takeover of a building at Cornell University while he was teaching there. So, whatever his own politics, it was natural that conservative commentators would reinforce and extend Bloom's charges. Writing in 1990 as chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney described universities as "tyrannical machines" more intent on generating new knowledge than on teaching established knowledge to the young. The university's failings in this regard were especially dangerous, Cheney maintained, because they were the institutions from which future K-12 teachers came.³⁹ By the end of the decade the alarms were being trumpeted not just about the degradation, but the de-Americanization of American universities. In *Liberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1998), Dinesh D'Souza warned of a "new worldview" taking over American colleges and universities. In place of academic standards, admission was based on demographic categories; core curricula had disappeared or been diluted with non-Western authors; and required seminars on tolerance and codes for proper speech had diminished academic freedom.

Charges from the right were answered on the left. At the time of its publication, *The Closing of the American Mind* received some scathing reviews. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum questioned whether Bloom deserved to be considered a philosopher at all. Another review described *Closing* as "a

book decent people would be ashamed to have written."⁴⁰ A decade later, in *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*, Lawrence W. Levine insisted that critics like Bloom, Cheney, and D'Souza had become "parodies of the very thing they're criticizing: ideologues whose research is shallow and whose findings are deeply flawed."⁴¹ Placing their arguments in historic context, with a survey that ran from the Yale Report of 1828 through Robert Maynard Hutchins's defense of a great books curriculum, Levine argued that college curricula had to evolve alongside the continuous evolution of human culture.

In *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995), Todd Gitlin, then of NYU, also aimed to contextualize debates about identity and curricula. The recent culture wars were, he argued, "symbolic melodramas" and part of a long history of American "purification crusades."⁴² Economic decline and globalization had renewed American demands for clear, certain, and familiar identities. This urge for the secure and familiar explained the appeals for a return to a canon built around "great books" and conservative social norms. But it distracted attention from another shared need: namely, the need to reestablish a common commitment to greater economic and racial equality and better lives for all Americans.

Unlike Gitlin and Levine, who entered the "culture wars" debate to answer conservative critics of higher education, in *Beyond the Culture Wars* Gerald Graff urged that real education could come only from teaching the conflicts themselves. Rather than trying to mask disagreements about what is beautiful, true, important, or silly, the disputes should be opened to students. "Acknowledging that culture is a debate rather than a monologue does not prevent us from energetically fighting for the truth of our own convictions," Graff explained. "On the contrary, when truth is disputed, we can seek it only by entering the debate."⁴³

Graff later amplified his argument by calling for the demystification of "academic talk," to enable students to engage in meaningful discussion and debate of important public questions. Without that capacity for reasoned argument, he said, students would be prepared neither to understand the conflicts between different camps, nor even to analyze the quality of different arguments. At a time when "talk-back radio, Cable TV talk shows, the Internet, and the reliance of politicians on opinion-polling" have become ubiquitous, we need "not only an 'informed citizenry,' but a citizenry that is sophisticated enough in weighing arguments to spot logical contradictions and non-sequiturs, not to mention outright lies."⁴⁴

Civic education, while grounded in history and foundational documents, is indeed less about the acquisition of a single "canon" or core or official interpretation than about skills and understanding. Educated citizens must be able to listen intently and empathetically to other people; to analyze

rationally what is said, read, and observed; to present thoughts clearly and to debate their merits vigorously; to confront unsupported assertions head on, rather than to dismiss or ignore them, or to talk past them with equally unfounded assertions; and, when appropriate, to identify reasonable strategies to take necessary action. Reasoned argumentation inevitably forces all parties to clarify their first principles—every logical chain must be rooted in evidence and clear lines of logic. Like all kinds of basic literacy, civic literacy, including familiarity with American history and government, is primarily a job for pre-collegiate education. The goal of postsecondary civic education should be mobilizing that knowledge to identify problems and evaluate options for addressing them. The civil conversation of democracy is not a point-counterpoint confrontation of opposing sound bites in which the two sides merely voice the glib scripts of their political parties. Real civic dialogue requires both sides to acknowledge that what they are discussing is a problem and also that it has no easy solution.

Service Learning

In the mid-1980s, yet another, quite different movement took root on college campuses to promote civic engagement and a sense of shared public purpose. This was the “service learning” movement, which began and mostly still remains an extracurricular, non-academic, and yet centrally educational enterprise. A significant point of origin is the founding by the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford of Campus Compact in 1985, an organization to help colleges support community service. Campus Compact now numbers more than a thousand member institutions. Other organizations—for example, City Year—offer full-time volunteer experiences to build both civic awareness and leadership skills in participants, who work to reduce school dropout rates or the physical decline of inner-city neighborhoods. With the availability of such structured and safe urban experiences, often welcomed by colleges (though not usually for academic credit), some graduating high school students aiming for 4-year colleges have been encouraged to take a community service “gap year” before starting college.

Such efforts as these can be valuable both for students and for the communities they serve. Participants may learn things no college class could teach, and colleges rightly construe their support as a contribution both to the education of their students and to the welfare of the communities in which they are situated. Nonetheless, such service programs have not reestablished civic education as a central, rather than a peripheral and “extra,” benefit of a college education.⁴⁵ Their strongest participation is by students from families with the financial wherewithal to fund their children’s non-remunerative work, and at 4-year liberal arts colleges, where students search

for indicators of public-spirited self-sacrifice to put on their résumés. In the modern American college, spending thousands of dollars for the privilege of building shelters in the Third World has more cachet than earning minimum wage as a lifeguard in one’s hometown. However popular, these programs may not be effective in inspiring civic responsibility. A 2009 study suggests that students who participate in Teach for America are less civic-minded after their service than they were before.⁴⁶ Even though Teach for America is intended to inspire a lifelong commitment to civic activism through 2 years of service in education, as Michael Winetrip of the *New York Times* has observed, in fact, it “has become an elite brand that will help build a résumé.”⁴⁷ One of the attractions of service learning is that it tends to be politically uncontroversial. No one could be against helping others and learning how the less fortunate live. But the actual impact of such experiences is rarely tested. Indeed, as Gerald Graff has asserted, higher education is beset with “incuriosity . . . about what students actually get out of college.”⁴⁸

A report by Elizabeth Hollander, former executive director of Campus Compact, found that among the 30 members of The Research Universities Civic Engagement Network (TRUCEN), all campuses claimed that preparing “students to improve the quality of life in our society” was part of their mission. Yet only one institution was actually engaged in a longitudinal study of the outcomes of their work in civic education.⁴⁹ She discovered that, in fact, “faculty buy-in” was the greatest obstacle to developing effective programs of service learning. One Harvard respondent even told her that “faculty think of service learning as anti-intellectual and/or vocational training.”⁵⁰ Though doubtless true, the comment was ironic in the face of the fact that Harvard has institutionalized a permanent faculty committee to ensure the educational vector of student public service activities.

On most college campuses, there is no shortage of volunteering—one survey found some 73% of undergraduates were so engaged—but little integration of such experiences with the academic side of student life.⁵¹ As a consequence, service learning may offer opportunities for community involvement, but scant opportunities to learn how public policy might address the needs that the volunteers are serving. Many campuses have identified ways for students to work in soup kitchens or homeless shelters, but few teach the same students how public policies could attack the underlying problems of hunger and homelessness.⁵² Both students and colleges, with good reason, feel virtuous, and a few students turn their extracurricular experiences into lifetimes of social commitment. But the majority of these young citizens graduate without the deeper learning they could later use to improve society.

In addition, service learning has not realized its promise as a form of civic education because the term “service” suggests charity, offering assistance to people who are poorer or in greater need than one’s self. However

heartfelt such undertakings may be, they engage students not as peers of other citizens, but as members of a social division superior to that of the unfortunate and disenfranchised. By focusing attention on the nobility of self-sacrifice and away from the republican spirit of reciprocal civic needs and benefits, service learning may, in fact, teach students to accept poverty and inequality as permanent conditions, rather than to improve social structures through civic and political means. The Carnegie Foundation report *Educating Citizens* relates a compelling example:

A student volunteering at a soup kitchen . . . very much enjoyed the experience and felt that it had made him a better person. Without thinking through the implications of his statement, he said, "I hope it is still around when my children are in college, so they can work here too."²³³

More generally, the goal of civic engagement as currently practiced on college campuses has more to do with fostering social entrepreneurship than with nurturing what may be called "social citizenship." Individualism is still held in high regard in American culture, and admonitions about the value of diversity and collegial respect for differences do not extend to communitarian lesson about American society as a whole. To be sure, the daily news is full of stories about young men and women who have established tutoring programs in New Orleans, college advising for inner-city Boston youth, or food cooperatives that bring organic vegetables to church soup kitchens in Berkeley. Alumni/ae magazines brim with stunning tales of individual social invention that convey admiration and thanks to generous alumni/ae who have supported the establishment of increasing numbers of programs to teach social entrepreneurship. While highlighting the outstanding achievements of the few, such programs do little to promote a sense of social citizenship among the many. Social service on college campuses has become one more thing in which talented and committed students can excel.

The term "social citizenship" commonly connotes entitlements people are owed by virtue of their status as citizens. Social citizenship in the form of old-age pensions, mandated vacations, health services, and child care is better established in Europe than in the United States, and taxes are correspondingly higher to pay for such entitlements. Yet the term properly denotes not the benefits themselves, but their precondition: a shared view of the reciprocal rights and duties that citizens owe one another. As part of their responsibilities for civic education, colleges should be expected to foster such a view of shared civic obligations. Sadly there is ample evidence that they are not now fulfilling that obligation.

In our recent history, there has been much outside of academe that has helped to undermine social citizenship. Efforts to secure civil rights for an

increasing range and variety of groups (African Americans, women, people with disabilities, and people on welfare, among them) have created a significant backlash. In consequence, questions of rights are often portrayed as a zero-sum game: If you gain a right, I lose one. In the divisive score keeping, faith is diminished in the common rights and obligations of social citizenship.

In addition, political efforts to portray "the government" as distanced from "the people" have been stunningly successful, even among people who do not fully subscribe to the conservative ideology that made this division a staple of political rhetoric. To most of us, government represents faceless bureaucrats that intrude into our lives in annoying ways: through tax audits, mandatory jury service, or cumbersome requirements associated with unemployment or disability benefits. Ronald Reagan touched a perfect chord when he announced that the phrase "I'm from the government and I'm here to help" included "the nine most terrifying words in the English language." Our knowledge of government debates and decisions concerning policies and programs that affect our lives is so mediated by expert organizations, political lobbies, and the media that such matters often seem not to be any of our business.

Efforts to reach across this divide by polling constituents are misdirected since our system of governance intentionally avoids direct democracy by popular plebiscite. Yet the failure of the system to respond instantly to the now easily administered opinion polls only add to public cynicism.

Clearly, the declining currency of public goods as goals of the college experience is in significant measure a result of the current atomization of American life. We operate as if we were disconnected, partisan, privatized islands and we seem to accept that state of things. By promoting social entrepreneurship, without corresponding attention to civic learning, higher education has unwittingly played a role in contributing to the problem of civic incoherence.

A WAY FORWARD

What lessons for the future can we take away from our analysis of the past of civic education in colleges and universities?²⁴ We will not offer a syllabus, a program, or a prescription for success. One size will not fit all: institutions are too diverse in their histories, their missions, and in the characteristics of their student bodies and their facilities. Our hope is to encourage interest, concern, discussion, and debate.

Even though we advance no specific prescriptions, we do recommend a framework for any successful program of civic education. This involves the tripod of intellect, morality, and action mentioned earlier in defining civic

education. We are convinced that any successful program must encompass all three. With that in mind, we describe three ways in which efforts to develop more successful civic education programs can proceed. Those are placing civic education at the core of students' academic experience, their degree programs or majors; decreasing student myopia, both spatial and temporal, so that they will see themselves as part of a larger, enduring world; and modeling civic responsibility throughout all departments and policies of a college or university. We close with some thoughts on the ultimate question for any normative educational essay such as this one. We have attempted to explain what we believe universities *should* do, and *why*. But with all the other pressures and demands on them, what are the real motivations for universities to take their civic responsibilities seriously? The issue ultimately comes down to having those who believe the civic mission of higher education is vital to find ways to mobilize their colleagues.

The Tripod: Intellect, Morality, Action

Intellect. Colleges and universities are defined by their commitment to study. However important extracurricular or residential experiences may be for some students, no form of learning will be taken seriously unless it has an academic dimension. It is not by chance that "credit" is awarded for academic activities, not for ones deemed extracurricular. So it is with the curriculum that we must begin.

To make a serious commitment to civic education, institutions of higher education cannot sequester civic learning in a specialized corner of the curriculum. There are many ways in which a demand to include civic education in the curriculum can be met, and to the extent that such a demand is one among many competing demands, creating a check box for civic education may at least establish that the institution is not ignoring the demand. However, for civic education to be embraced as a *primary* purpose of the college experience, civic lessons should be spread across the curriculum, not concentrated in one course area.

Most academic disciplines and professional or vocational fields of study offer opportunities for reflection on issues of current political or social importance. In some cases the opportunities are obvious. It is hard to imagine a course in sociology, for example, that does not raise questions about the nature of civil societies. At some point in their lives, all professors have to explain to the uninitiated why their work matters to the world. This may be challenging. For most professors, the academic respectability of their work rises, not falls, when it is severed from the world of values. In the ranking system of the modern academy, in which the quality metric is the opinion of their disciplinary or professional peers, few scholars want their work judged

by its larger moral, social, or civic relevance. Nevertheless, a commitment to civic education requires that at least some attention be given to the relevance of any and all subject matter to public problems.

To engage faculty in civic education, the practical, applied, and even vocational dimensions of academic scholarship must become a respected part of ordinary teaching, regardless of program, discipline, or field. This happens naturally in programs with a career focus and must now also become the norm in colleges and universities centered in the liberal arts. For example, if a computer scientist pauses in a class on networking to start a discussion about the relevance of network design decisions to the possibility of anonymous electronic speech, that should be a curricular plus, to be balanced, of course, against the costs of not covering quite as much technical material about network protocols. If a historian calls attention to linkages between past and present, that should not be dismissed as an anachronistic focus on the present, but rather as providing yet another means to understand how and why the past is important. If a professor of business administration makes discussion of current financial news a regular feature of her introductory survey, that should be understood as no less vital than theoretical discussions of management practices and principles.

As these examples illustrate, effective civic education requires broad faculty buy-in. Professors must recognize that their educational responsibilities involve more than providing the best training and preparation in their particular fields of expertise. In tandem with the administration, the faculty must come together to accept some common goals for civic education, and must be incentivized and rewarded accordingly. This will involve a shift of campus culture at most institutions, a shift that will be possible only with a shift in the standards by which institutions judge their success. We return to these driving forces later.

Morality. Outside our houses of religious worship, the subject of morality causes discomfort on campus. The academic revolution drove the subject out of the portfolio of professors. Faculty simply do not consider good and evil to be their business, even for discussion, much less judgment. The moral development of individual students is regarded as a parental responsibility, if indeed it is acknowledged that there is anything left to develop by the age students enter college.

Of course, every college has standards of behavior for its students, both academic and behavioral. But as American society has become more litigious, as the value of a college degree and an unblemished transcript has increased, and as students' legal rights to privacy have expanded, student malfeasance has come to be regarded more as rule-breaking and less as ethical or moral transgressions. It has become risky for colleges to reprimand

students for violations of a general principle in the absence of a corresponding specific, precisely articulated regulation. When students are called up for their transgressions, the discussion then tends to be about the details of acts, and whether they fit the text of the codes, rather than the principles underlying the entire educational community. Of necessity, deans, program directors, and counselors act more like lawyers and less like moral educators. The accused student may learn nothing from the experience, except how to fight a charge. Owing to confidentiality the student's peers likely learn nothing at all.

The effect may be a process that meets important (and legally mandated) standards of fairness, but an important opportunity for moral education has been lost. College students—whether 18 or 35—are not too old to learn to be better people, or to be freed from the various forms of self-centeredness, prejudice, greed, anger, and jealousy with which they may have been raised, or indeed infused by the process of gaining admission or the resources to go to college. In the interest of graduating fewer Bernie Maddoffs and Rod Blagojevichs, colleges should find varied ways to talk about *why* their standards are what they are and what kind of people their graduates are expected to be and not save such discussion for presidential remarks at graduation. Of course, some institutions do exactly that, but the practice is too rare in secular universities and colleges. The diversity of ethnicities, regional origins, religions, and sexual orientations that colleges justly celebrate need not drive all discussion of shared values from the scene. Every college year brings its teachable moments. The lessons that must be articulated in times of crisis are far more credible if they are only reminders of principles that were discussed on less volatile occasions.

But matters of morality should not be thought of only in relation to matters of rules, regulations, and community-wide events. They should be central to the concerns taken up in college classrooms. As we have said, there are opportunities in almost every discipline and professional program to raise issues of civic importance and also to focus attention on matters of ethics and values. Consider, for example, the study of economics, which is so significant for policy decisions affecting social progress in America and in the world.

For several decades the field of economics has been following the path already discussed: more mathematical and more scientific, and hence more respectable. The humiliating failure of most economists to anticipate the 2008–2009 global economic collapse provides, perhaps, an opportunity to encourage students to experience other disciplinary perspectives on economic issues.

We are not economists and we would not venture to suggest how economics should be taught. But if the modal common experience of undergraduates in business-related programs—and many other students as well—is a

course emphasizing self-interest as the fundamental basis for rational choice, colleges and universities must ask themselves how a counterbalancing civic message can be considered through the study of nonprofit management, global poverty, climate change, or the origins and future of life on earth, for example. There is no shortage of instructive problems whose history and solutions would balance the interest of students in achieving personal financial success.

Action. Civic learning is about the effect of human decisions on other humans and on society at large. We have noted the benefits and limitations of the service learning model, in which students participate as volunteers in community or other public service activities, with the aim both of addressing some public problem and learning about that problem from direct experience. The most serious limitation of this model is that it tends to exploit, and reinforce, the separation of student experience into separate curricular and extracurricular dominions. Students are left to integrate the two on their own—or worse, to conclude that their academic experience has nothing to contribute to their understanding of poverty, hunger, or homelessness.

What is needed instead is the routine exploitation of the outside world as a natural laboratory for concepts discussed in the classroom. Needless to say, care must be taken not to violate protocols concerning human subjects and other ethical issues arising from learning in the field. But the difficulties involved in taking learning outside of the classroom should not preclude far more imaginative experiments in integrating the academic and the “real” worlds. This is already well established in some fields, which require practice from the outset. Nursing and education are classic examples. But integration is also possible in other fields and disciplines, in history, political science, architecture, and economics, to name just a few. Even if the engagement takes place in a traditional classroom, real-world concerns can be brought to the fore in most class discussions. In engineering, for example, there are clear opportunities for students to grapple with open-ended problems of the world from domains such as transportation, manufacture, and food supply.

Finally, of course, the university itself is an agent in society, and its policies and decisions provide ready material for lessons about civic responsibility. We shall argue that a prime source of civic learning is understanding the importance of institutional behavior of colleges and universities themselves.

Three Recommendations

Even though, as we have said, we do not believe that there is “one best way” to revive the civic purposes of higher education, we do have three recommendations for ways to move forward.

Integrating Civic Education into the Major or Core Field. We believe that all undergraduate students should be educated broadly. This is true for part-time students in vocational programs no less than full-time students enrolled at 4-year residential colleges. Narrow vocational training may lead to a first job, but it will not serve one's lifelong interests, when everyone is now likely to change jobs many times over a career.

But our topic here is narrower. Because we live in a democratic society, civic education is important for all students, regardless of primary focus, and it belongs everywhere in the curriculum. Still in the American higher education system of the early 21st century, the most important place for it to appear is in the major or the essential core course(s) of a vocational program. Civic education must be central rather than peripheral.

Regardless of field, faculty members care most about the subjects in which they were trained and are expert. That is true for professors of Italian literature, modern philosophy, nutrition, Greek art, or fashion design. They may teach general education classes or participate in a survey about the "foundations" of education, nursing, or some other field, but civic education must be infused into the seminars and courses most closely associated with the personal interests and specializations of different faculty members. Only in that way will civic learning take on the intellectual excitement and affective significance that make such seminars and courses special, a faculty member's signature class. Courses in a major or professional core are, moreover, the ones in which professors have the best chance of speaking from experience about the relation of their work to the problems of the world. It is where they are most likely to be able to model for their students their own commitments to improve society. It is where they can speak with pride about the public purpose of their field of learning.

At many colleges, departmental meetings are the place where a commitment to civic education must be forged, if it is to take firm root anywhere. They are the place where successes and failures can be shared and where respected senior professors can model for their junior colleagues that their civic commitments earn the respect, not the derision, of their most important colleagues. At institutions more oriented toward part-time adjunct faculty, discussions of civic education must occur as faculty members are recruited and hired and must be evaluated as an integral part of a course load.

Promoting Long-term, Global Thinking. Students today are focused on next steps—the next semester and finding the tuition to cover it, the next test or the next party, a first job. Such temporal myopia has often been a characteristic of students. What has changed is that our major social institutions are behaving just as childishly. Facts about energy resources are distorted to swing votes in next month's election. Corporate decisions about long-term

investments are made on the basis of the demands for good numbers in an upcoming quarterly shareholder report. Of all the major institutions in American society, colleges and universities have the best chance of instilling respect for longer-range thinking. If they do not do it, no one will.

If there is one civic lesson we would like students to take away from their undergraduate experience, it is this: *You are responsible not only for your own future, but also for the future of the world.* Not that we expect everyone to become president of the United States or a titan of industry. Rather, students must be encouraged to understand that every decision or action, however large or small, will have an impact on the air we all breathe, the way nations will co-exist, and the quality of life for many people, some known to you and some unknown, some seen to us and some unseen. It has become a cliché, but students must be encouraged to think globally, even when they act locally. They must be reminded that just as the flapping of butterfly wings on the West Coast of the United States has an impact on the movement of air on the East Coast, each action they take has consequences far beyond what they can see. Our collective actions can affect whether the world will be a better place, or worse, and enhancing awareness of that fact must be a primary purpose of civic education in higher education.

Students, especially the developmentally unfinished students of traditional college age, are likely to hear such messages with some embarrassment and cynicism. The culture of youth has always been about living in the moment and on the spot, and imagining that there will be an endless adult future for responsible behavior. The natural myopia of traditional-age college youth has been reinforced by the focus of many colleges on the health and happiness of students, often at the expense of expectations concerning responsible behavior. Equally important, the short-term economic and vocational rationales for college attendance held out to most students has made it difficult to think about one's education in terms that go beyond immediate self-interest. If higher education is to meet its civic obligations, all the forces supporting atomized, myopic thinking must be countered with encouragement to understand one's stake in matters such as drastic disparities in income and in consumption, within the U.S. and globally; the threat of global climate change and accompanying ecological collapse; and the prevalence of preventable disease and hunger.

The Internet may have flattened the world, as Thomas Friedman has told us, but Americans are less knowledgeable about international affairs than they were before the Internet came into being. Higher education must take that as a challenge. The percentage of TV newscasts devoted to international news has decreased from 35% in 1970 to just 12% today.⁵⁵ If colleges and universities do not cultivate civic knowledge and global perspectives, the airwaves will remain "the wasteland" Newton Minow warned

about many years ago.⁵⁶ The prospects of ecological catastrophe are not new. As Jared Diamond has taught us, if we see ourselves as participants in a particular moment in a long human history, our natural resource problems seem much less improbable. Civilizations have collapsed before because of human folly.⁵⁷ Higher education must contribute to making sure that does not happen again.

To have students see themselves as part of a human story that is larger geographically and more enduring in time than the contingencies of their homework assignments and job prospects—we believe that should be both the goal of civic understanding and the inspiration that will make all of us take it seriously.

Modeling Civic Engagement Through the Institution. Institutions teach through their policies and practices, their governance and organization—through everything they do. No college or university will be successful in renewing its civic mission unless it is willing to scrutinize all aspects of its operations, from the meetings of its boards of trustees to its engagement with its local community and the wage structures for its department of buildings and grounds, to ensure that they embody the values articulated in the institution's mission. Civic education is not merely a matter of student instruction. It is not merely a matter for the faculty to take care of. It must be a concern for *all* those involved in leading and administering institutions of higher education. Civic responsibility is manifest in the behavior of governing boards and in the behavior they demand of those to whom they delegate responsibilities, presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans. Excessive compensation for those at the top has been much in the news in recent decades and is one of the most obvious ways in which boards have failed to align stated and revealed values. But there are others. Nothing is more damaging to the moral credibility of an institution than blatant lying by its leaders, and there are many softer misrepresentations that are, in the long run, equally damaging. These range from accepting gifts in “the public interest,” even when the true interest is a pet project of some donor or the president, to turning a blind eye to neighborhood integrity and local land values when those may stand in the way of campus expansion.

As higher education has become an ever more expensive and competitive business, the ways in which decisions are reached have become ever less transparent. Public relations staff airbrush the underlying motivations for policies. Branding and marketing are essential in American higher education today, but some colleges and universities have press offices staffed with image czars who are incongruous in institutions devoted to discovering and transmitting knowledge. Renewing the civic mission of higher education will require that judgments about university policies and practices prioritize not

short-term image management, but the deliberate and reasoned search for truth. Unless colleges and universities model open and enlightened decision-making, there can be little reason to hope that their alumni/ae will do so.

Institutions of higher education are agents in society and all their decisions provide ready material for lessons about civic responsibility. What are the admissions and recruitment policies and what purposes, institutional and public, does the institution think they serve? If there is an endowment, how is it invested? From whom does the institution acquire its goods and services? Perhaps most important, what are the priorities revealed through differences among departments and schools?

At many institutions, those departments and schools that are most directly aligned with public services—public health, education, and social work, notable among them—are much less generously supported than are those representing more highly remunerated professions—such as medicine, business, and law. Such discrepancies may be understandable in light of differentials in alumni/ae giving. Still, they reinforce the second-class status of the “caring” professions in which women have traditionally predominated. Recognizing that, some institutions have created loan forgiveness programs and scholarships for students in public service fields. Like service learning, those resonate of charity and do not address the systemic issues involved. Finding ways to elevate public service will be a prime challenge to institutions concerned with civic learning.

Where Are the Incentives?

Higher education has become a very complex, competitive business. We cannot say that a renewed emphasis on civic education is likely to yield a quick payoff. It probably will not raise an institution's ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*. It may not appeal to donors as much as a winning football team or a “leadership” program that carries one's name. We are also painfully aware that books about higher education are filled with exhortations, most of which, if they are read at all, are quickly disparaged and ignored as naïve and unrealistic.

Living as we do in a culture where policy matters are dominated by economic thinking, we have wondered whether there might be incentives we could recommend to foster movement toward a renewal of civic purposes. Could federal aid to higher education be tilted toward institutions that could demonstrate a robust commitment to civic learning? Could state and regional accrediting agencies mandate demonstrations of effective civic education as part of their reviews? In the end, however, policies mandating moral and civic commitments seem unwise. Any compliance they might bring would likely be superficial and technical. Persuasion, encompassing presidential

leadership, collegial arm-twisting, and everything in between, is likely to be the most effective weapon.

Sometimes people are inspired to do good things just because they believe that doing good is right. Sometimes like-minded people can help one another do what needs to be done regardless of immediate personal gain. Evidence abounds that the world would be a better place with less greed and more altruism, less short-term profit taking, and more social investment. Perhaps the era of irrational exuberance that has led to so much environmental, political, and even personal suffering has come to an end. Perhaps dismay with political polarization and vast inequality will now rekindle the kind of civic idealism that has characterized the American experiment at its best. We believe the time has come, for the good of the nation and the world, to call our colleges and universities back to their civic mission. We can only hope that others will agree.

NOTES

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