

The American Commonwealth Project: Colleges and Universities as Agents and Architects of Democracy

Summary: The American Commonwealth Project (ACP), a partnership among higher education institutions and associations, the White House, and federal agencies including the U.S. Department of Education, seeks to further the movement of colleges and universities as agents and architects of democracy. ACP will occur from September, 2011, to July, 2012. Initiated on invitation from the White House Office of Public Engagement to the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC),¹ ACP consists of conversations and events at national, regional, state and local campus levels, involving college students, faculty, staff, administrators and community partners. The ACP will culminate in a **Summit** in Washington, D.C., on the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act establishing land grant colleges, once known as democracy colleges. The aim is to increase the number of colleges and universities who are committed to being agents and architects of democracy.

Civic engagement – what is it and why does it matter? Civic engagement -- participation in civic life through such activities as voting, involvement in community problem-solving, public contributions through work, membership in associations, volunteering, charitable giving, participation in political activities, and exchanging favors with neighbors -- is correlated with many positive outcomes. The Congressionally-established National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), has found that civic engagement is associated with good government, economic success, effective schools, and individual health.²

Differing levels of civic engagement cannot be explained by demographics. *A Tale of Two Cities*, the 2010 report for NCoC by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) and the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, analyzed reasons for the relative success of the Twin Cities in Minnesota, the nation's most civically engaged community, compared with Miami, Florida, the least engaged. Individuals in Minneapolis-St. Paul who are in the lowest income group are more likely to work with neighbors, participate in voluntary associations and political activities outside of elections, and attend public meetings than are people in the wealthiest tier in Miami. The key factor in the Twin Cities' success is the development of a "culture of civic empowerment" in which diverse groups, once bitter antagonists, developed skills and capacities for work across differences to solve problems and to build a common future. This civically empowering culture has created a widespread sense of optimism that people can shape their common future – "we can do it."³

Colleges, universities, and other educational groups grounded in the life of the Twin Cities were central to this civic learning culture. Colleges and universities which become agents and architects of democracy, with strong roots and relationships in local places, will also be central to revitalization of 21st century democratic society.

Problem addressed: Despite slight rises after 9/11 and in the 2009 economic recession, overall civic trends in recent years have declined.⁴ Some call this a "civic recession." Research of the CDC, CIRCLE and other groups strongly suggest that recession in civic life can be traced significantly to erosion of empowering civic learning experiences which teach the skills of collaborative work across differences. Today many forces erode the spaces and opportunities for such civic learning. We are more and more in silos and bubble cultures of sameness which produce what might be called civic ignorance.⁵ James Madison, author of the Constitutional Preamble, warned about the dangers of civic ignorance long ago: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance... A people that mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge brings."

Erosion of public purposes and practices in higher education contributes to civic recession and civic ignorance. Studies show a growing detachment of faculty cultures from the lives of students, communities, cross-disciplinary pursuits and larger public purposes. As Thomas Bender puts it in the introduction to *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, a study by leaders of four disciplines of their development over the half century after World War II, "From a means to an end [the disciplines] became an end in themselves, the possession of the scholars who constituted them," distant from civic life. A culture of detached expertise has spread throughout society. As Josiah Ober observes in *Democracy and Knowledge*, classical Athens had many methods of aggregating expert and amateur knowledge. In contrast, "Contemporary practice often treats free citizens as passive subjects by discounting the value of what they know... Willful ignorance is practiced by the parties of the right and left alike." An Athenian brought by time machine to the present would see the

cloistered expert approach as “both worse for democracy and less likely to benefit the community.” On campuses, there is evidence, which Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa summarize in *Academically Adrift*, that “college students’ academic effort has dramatically declined in recent decades.” A 2011 survey of 1000 college presidents by the Pew Research Center in association with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found a broad “crisis of confidence,” with more than a third believing higher education is headed in the wrong direction.⁶

The American Commonwealth Project (ACP): There are also substantial countertrends. The founding of Campus Compact by a group of presidents in 1985 marked a first step, seeking to strengthen students’ experiences of service. In 1999 the [Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Mission of Research Universities](#), co-authored by CDC director Harry Boyte and Campus Compact director Elizabeth Hollander and commissioned by a diverse group of higher education leaders, called for American universities to deepen their ties to communities and to teach public work across differences, “freeing the powers” of all stakeholders to contribute to democracy as a way of life. [The Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education](#) translated the *Wingspread Declaration’s* call for colleges and universities to become “agents and architects of democracy” to the whole of higher education. It has been signed by hundreds of presidents and chancellors.

Among other effects, the declarations encouraged the formation of the American Democracy Project (ADP) in 2003, now including some 230 state colleges and universities. ADP is joined this year by a group of 30 community colleges in the Democracy Commitment. These efforts are central to engaging higher education institutions as agents and architects of democracy which are also stewards of place where students and others develop empowering civic skills. As George Mehaffy, AASCU vice president, puts it, state colleges and universities “are ideal places to focus on building civic agency among students, faculty, and staff.”⁷

The ACP will include a series of national video conferences, with case studies and research background briefing papers. These conferences will have the goals of identifying federal policies which support engagement; identifying high impact practices and indicators of engagement; and exploring new areas for research. They will also be used to stimulate discussions at regional, state and local campus levels, using also the Carnegie Classification on Community Engagement as a resource. Groups indicating interest include the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, Imagining America, Minnesota Campus Compact, the Kettering Foundation, and the Jandris Center for Innovative Higher Education at the University of Minnesota. A steering committee will oversee the effort with a presidential council chaired by Nancy Cantor, president of Syracuse University, serving as an advisory group. The White House Office of Public Engagement will identify key leaders from federal agencies to participate in conversations and to be spokespersons for engaged higher education. Discussions will be organized by five themes:

- **The civic history of higher education:** What are the roots and histories of community and state colleges and universities, as well as other higher education institutions, which provide resources for colleges becoming agents and architects of democracy and stewards of place?
- **The civic nature of the disciplines and professions:** What are the civic traditions and missions which produced professionals like “citizen teachers” and “citizen business owners”? How are they revived today? What are essential civic skills that are also career skills required for success?
- **Student civic learning:** What are promising curricular and co-curricular models for developing students as efficacious community builders in a diverse democracy?
- **Public scholarship:** What are models of research of public benefit, whether conducted by students or faculty? How are these being revitalized, adapted and strengthened?
- **Community partnerships:** What are successful approaches to deepening colleges and universities as partners in civic, economic, political, and social development – as “stewards of place”?

The ACP will culminate in a two day Summit on the Public Purposes of Higher Education in July, 2012. The Summit will involve participants from the earlier meetings and others. The overall outcome for ACP will be to expand the number of colleges and universities committed to being agents and architects of democracy.

Appendix One

ACP themes aim at strengthening colleges and universities as agents and architects of democracy and stewards of place in conversation with leaders from federal agencies:

- 1) **The civic history and mission of higher education:** Civic histories are part of an ongoing process of meaning-making, understanding present reality and its possibilities as a work-in-progress. Documenting and telling such stories are key to revitalizing public purpose. A rich literature is beginning to emerge that surfaces the civic and democratic identities of colleges and universities which functioned as stewards of place and agents and architects of democracy. For instance, in the land grant system, Scott Peters, associate professor at Cornell, has pioneered in this work. In *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, Christopher Brown, new president of Alcorn State University, has made revitalization of the civic history of HBCUs – what he calls “the democratic ideal” -- the centerpiece of his administration (see for instance Brown, *Black Colleges: New perspectives on policy and practice* Praeger, 2004). The USDA is a likely lead agency for this conversation.
- 2) **The civic nature of the disciplines and professions:** Research and professional cultures have in recent decades become far more detached from local civic life and community problems, with the result that professionals increasingly understand their work in narrow disciplinary terms. But there are powerful emergent countertrends which *explicitly tie career and workforce preparation to citizenship*, including skills of collaborative, contextual, publicly-oriented work that are highly prized in today’s knowledge economy. Leading examples include the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota (<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/cpc/>) whose mission is to become “a national leader in preparing professionals for effective democratic engagement with communities and in generating community-based research that advances knowledge and solves local problems.” The Community Campus Partnership for Health (CCHP) has a focus in this area, and the Council of Independent Colleges has an initiative on vocation that could be easily adapted. The lead agency for discussion is likely HHS.
- 3) **Public Scholarship:** Against the grain of narrow definitions of scholarship, there has been a growing movement to define research and scholarship in ways that are far more public and engaged with local communities. Portland State University, whose motto is “let knowledge serve the city,” pioneered the concept, creating a rich network of community partnerships and community-based research projects. Among research one universities, Syracuse University, with the motto “Scholarship in Action,” is a widely acknowledged leader, changing promotion and tenure codes and developing extensive infrastructure which connects faculty and students to communities, cultural institutions and practical problems in Syracuse (see, for instance, President Nancy Cantor’s recent speech at Michigan on public knowledge in the humanities disciplines, “Inciting Insight” <http://vimeo.com/23692595>). The *Imagining America Scholarship in Public* report http://imaginingamerica.org/TTI/TTI_FINAL.pdf, authored by Julie Ellison and Tim Eatman, has been used by a number of colleges and universities to increase engaged scholarship and research. The most innovative agency to date is NSF, which could take leadership on the government side.
- 4) **Civic Learning:** Civic learning that teaches the skills of empowering, collaborative work across differences goes well beyond curriculum and classroom teaching. Thus, for instance, a 2007 study by state colleges of what makes for successful retention and graduation rates for Hispanic students, *Hispanic Student Success*, underlines the importance of practices that teach such collaborative learning, including creating strong connections to cultural communities on and off campus, development of faculty, staff, and student understanding and appreciation of cultural differences, and abilities successfully to negotiate inevitable tensions and conflicts. The “Civic Recession” report to the DOE forthcoming from AAC&U is a foundation on which to build here, as is the Civic Agency Initiative of AASCU’s. The DOE is the natural leader here, though other agencies (e.g. Park Services, NEH) could play very helpful roles as well.
- 5) **Community Partnerships:** For more than a decade, a movement in higher education has sought to deepen reciprocal, productive relationships between college and universities and communities. AASCU’s 2002 report on colleges as “Stewards of Place,” now currently under revision, is a strong example. Other schools have also been increasingly focused on contributions to local communities. The University of Pennsylvania’s partnership work with West Philadelphia on school reform, home ownership, business development, neighborhood safety and other issues has helped to propel this movement and has worked with HUD to create an Anchoring Institution Task Force. Several liberal arts college have become national models for the depth of their connections to diverse communities, such as Augsburg College in Minneapolis, recently chosen as one of six winners of the Presidential Award for Community Service. HUD is a natural leader on the government side.

¹ The initial plan was prepared on the invitation of Jon Carson, Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, by Harry Boyte, Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College and a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School, with the assistance of Courtney Chapin, White House Liaison at the National Endowment for the Humanities. For parallels see also (<http://americasgreatoutdoors.gov/>).

² For example, Robert Putnam finds that “states where citizens meet, join, vote, and trust in unusual measure boast consistently higher educational performance than states where citizens are less engaged with civic and community life.” Such engagement, he finds, is “by far” a bigger correlate of educational outcomes than is spending on education, teachers’ salaries, class size, or demographics. Robert D. Putnam, “Community-Based Social Capital and Educational Performance,” in Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti, eds., *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 69-72. For the benefits of volunteering to individuals, see John Wilson, “Volunteering,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, (2000), pp. 231-3. For a finding that civic higher participation in Chicago is associated with lower death rates, especially for Black men, see Kimberly A. Lochner, Ichiro Kawachia, Robert T. Brennan and Stephen L. Bukac, “Social Capital and Neighborhood Mortality Rates in Chicago,” *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 56, issue 8 (April 2003), pp. 1797-1805

³ For a summary, see <http://www.peterlevine.ws/mt/archives/2011/01/a-tale-of-two-c.html>; for the report itself, <http://www.ncoc.net/TwoCitiesCHI>.

⁴ See the research trends of the NCoc at <http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?tray=content&tid=&cid=258>

⁵ See David Brooks, “The Segmented Society,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2007; Sue Halpern, “Mind Control and the Internet,” *New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2011.

⁶ Thomas Bender and Carl Schorske, Eds., *American Academic Cultures in Transformation* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 1; see Harry C. Boyte, *Public Engagement in a Civic Mission* (Council on Public Policy Education, 2000), for a description of faculties’ experiences of detachment, based on interviews with 30 senior scholars and administrators at the University of Minnesota; Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift* (University of Chicago, 2011, p. 3); Karin Fischer, “Crisis of Confidence Threatens Colleges,” *The Chronicle*, May 15, 2011, p. 1.

⁷ Mehaffy quoted in Harry Boyte, “Against the Current: Developing the Civic Agency of Students,” *Change*, May/June, 2008, p. 9.