



WASC

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Higher Ed's Higher Purpose: Serving the Public Good

Higher Education's Accountability for the Public Good

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"Unless education has some frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unified objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy."

John Dewey (1937)

"The word 'academic' is synonymous with 'irrelevant'."

Saul Alinsky (1946)

I begin with these two statements because they represent, as I read them, two views of the public good in higher education. One is what we might call an aspirational public good – an aspirational view of higher education as contributing to a democracy, and the other what we might think of as a historical public good – a historical view of higher education's wrenchingly complex relationship to democracy, one that for many has not been inclusive, has left certain people out, has done damage to certain communities, has been a part of larger systems of oppression, marginalization, and discrimination, and inequality – has been irrelevant to building a wider public culture of democracy.

In 1999, Edgar Beckham, the first African American dean of the college at Wesleyan University and a program officer at the Ford Foundation leading campus diversity initiatives during the 1990s, named the divide between aspirational and historical democracy. He wrote that those who aspired to strengthening "the civic mission of the research university...discern something in history that should be 'recovered'" (1999, p. 6). According to Beckham, these scholars viewed the civic mission of higher education as "something that once existed, but which has been lost," something that required retrieval. Yet, for many others, whose scholarly work was defined by a social justice agenda, he noted, "the rhetoric of civic renewal can sound dangerous, threatening to smooth over the gross injustices of the past . . . for America's minority populations."

At best, even with aspirations for what Ernest Boyer once called “a commitment to the common good,” our campuses have largely fallen short. In 1996 Boyer wrote - and I would suggest that it is more applicable today - that “there is a growing feeling in this country that higher education is, in fact, part of the problem rather than the solution. Increasingly the campus is seen as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation’s most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems.”

As I talk about what colleges and universities can do to demonstrate contributions to the public good – or what we aspire to with standards such as 1.1 and 2.2a, I’d like us to keep both of these perspectives in mind. Greater awareness of the historical view of higher education and democracy can help us in what we aspire toward in affirming the public purposes of higher education.

Institutional Purpose

1.1 The institution’s formally approved statements of purpose are appropriate for an institution of higher education and clearly define its essential values and character and ways in which it contributes to the public good.

Teaching and Learning

2.2 a Undergraduate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. These programs ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking. In addition, undergraduate programs actively foster creativity, innovation, an appreciation for diversity, ethical and civic responsibility, civic engagement, and the ability to work with others.

I’d like us to consider the following questions:

- How can and do campuses demonstrate a commitment to the public good?
- What is the evidence?
- Can campuses contributing the public good continue with business as usual? Or said differently, to what extent is a commitment to the public good a commitment to transforming our institutions?

In exploring these questions, we might discern three levels of contributions to the public good. We might think of these as:

LEVEL 1: Thin Contributions to the Public Good

LEVEL 2: Transformational Contributions to the Public Good

LEVEL 3: Thick Contributions to the Public Good

LEVEL 1: Thin Contributions to the Public Good

In thinking about “thin” levels of contributions to the public good, Slaughter and Rhoades, in their 2004 book *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, make the case that throughout the 20th century, there were two competing “knowledge/learning regimes” operating within higher education, both coexisting within the dominant

institutional cultures of higher education. They refer to one regime as the “public good regime;” the other, the “academic capitalism regime.”

In contrast to the academic capitalism regime, the public good knowledge/learning regime is “characterized by valuing knowledge as a public good to which the citizenry has claims”; its “cornerstone . . . was basic science that led to the discovery of new knowledge within academic disciplines, serendipitously leading to public benefits”.

According to this historical narrative of higher education, the public good regime prevailed early in the 1900s, but by the end of the 20th century the academic capitalism regime had largely driven out the public good regime. Thus, in the early 21st century, academic capitalism is in ascendancy if not dominance, and the public good is under siege.

It is important to note that both the public good regime and the academic capitalism regime coexisted together for a century or more - and in that co-existence both perpetuated the existing institutional structures and cultures—in other words, neither necessitated fundamental institutional change and transformation.

The public good regime reflects the dominant academic culture of higher education, often characterized as “scientific,” “rationalized,” and “objectified,” meaning that the approach to public problems is predominantly shaped by specialized expertise “applied” externally “to” or “on” the community, providing so called “solutions” to what has been determined to be the community’s “needs.” In the public good regime, the public service function of the university is defined by an activity (e.g., research or service) that happens in a place (a community) whereby knowledge flows from the university to the community, the university is the center of problem-solving, and the university produces knowledge that the community consumes—all done with the self-proclaimed justification of providing public benefits.

The public good regime does not require that the university do anything differently. All that is needed is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what exists, without disturbing the basic organizational features or substantially altering the ways in which faculty and students perform their roles. There is no need for major shifts in institutional culture.

As one scholar of literary studies, who identifies himself as a public good scholar, has written, the existing “structure will do quite nicely as a home, thank you, though it ever so badly needs paint, perhaps an addition or two, and a bit of landscaping”. All that is needed, in this positioning of higher education’s relation to the public good, are what he calls “innovative efforts to bring the knowledge, expertise, and protocols of careful, critical thinking developed over generations within the academy to bear on the experiences and problems of our fellow citizens who make up the general public”.

This, I would argue, is a “thin” framing of the public good and it leads to thin commitments. Looking across the terrain of higher education, what is evidence of a “thin” commitment to the public good.

We see thin commitments to the public good when there are offices or center for community engagement that provide a structural claim, but where the efforts are under staffed and under resourced and unconnected to larger institutional commitments.

We see thin commitments to the public good when we explain the lack of public understanding of all the wonderful things that we do as problem of public relations – instead of as a problem of public relationships.

There has been in recent years, in some ways marked by the great economic collapse of 2007, but also as part of a larger and more extensive trend, the focus of contributions to the public good by campuses to be increasingly attentive to economic development, particularly for public higher education. The role of colleges and universities in economic development is admittedly important, but at the same time there is a growing emphasis on economic development as being synonymous with the whole of campus’s commitment to the public good.

As Standard 2.2a suggests, contributions to the public good should be focused on impacting the core academic and developmental aspects of students’ educational experience and on changing the fundamental academic operations of the campus. Economic development efforts aimed at procurement, employment, and investments do not impact the student experience and do not transform the core academic operations of the campus, but are instead focused on the core business operations. This, of course, is not an either-or dichotomy – it should be a both-and approach. The last decades of the 20th century and the first of the 21st century witnessed both the rise of the neoliberal, market-driven, highly privatized university and the demand for universities to more effectively address critical social issues, many of which were impervious to market solutions. Contributions to the public good need to be evident in the core academic functions and operations of the campus, or they remain “thin” commitments.

LEVEL 2: Transformational Contributions to the Public Good

Transformational contributions to the public good are in many ways what we see more and more campuses striving towards.

Where the goal of the public good regime is for academics who create knowledge to move it beyond the ivory tower, a transformational approach to the public good means that the goal is for academics to move beyond the ivory tower to create knowledge.

In this way, a contributions to the public good comprises core academic norms determined by values such as inclusiveness, participation, task sharing, and reciprocity in public problem-solving, and an equality of respect for the knowledge and experience that everyone contributes to education, knowledge generation, and community building.

Academic work is done *with* the public; there is shared authority for knowledge generation and co-creation of knowledge and problem-solving that values relational, localized, contextual knowledge. Collaborative relationships are by their very nature trans-disciplinary (where knowledge transcends the disciplines and the university) and asset-based (where valid and legitimate knowledge exists outside the university). Collaboration runs counter to the dominant culture of the academy that privileges specialized expertise above all else. Expertise is important and has its place. However, the democratic dimension of collaboration is critical of expertise that claims an exclusionary position relative to other forms of knowledge and other knowledge producers. Advancing the public good places the university as part of an ecosystem of knowledge production addressing public problem-solving, with the purpose of advancing an inclusive, collaborative, and deliberative democracy.

What my colleagues and I have named as “democratic engagement” is an institutional approach to the public good that is grounded in transformational practices.

Comparing Public Good Frameworks

	Thin Public Good	Transformational Public Good
Community Relationships	Transactional	Reciprocity
	Deficit-based understanding of community	Asset-based understanding of community
	Academic work done <i>for</i> the public	Academic work done <i>with</i> the public
Knowledge production/research	Extractive and Applied	Inclusive, collaborative, problem-oriented
	Unidirectional flow of knowledge	Multi-directional flow of knowledge
Epistemology and Pedagogy	Positivist/scientific/technocratic	Relational, localized, contextual
	Distinction between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers	Co-creation of knowledge
	Primacy of academic knowledge	Shared authority for knowledge creation
	University as the center of public problem-solving	University as a part of an ecosystem of knowledge production addressing public problem-solving

In a “transformational” approach to the public good, students learn cooperative and creative problem-solving within learning environments in which faculty, students, and individuals from the community work and deliberate together. Politics is understood through explicit awareness and experiencing of patterns of power that are present in the relationship between the university and the community – and politics is not reduced to partisanship and advocacy. In the democratic-centered paradigm, academics are not partisan political activists, but, as described by Albert Dzur, “have sown the seeds of a more deliberative democracy” in universities and communities “by cultivating norms of

equality, collaboration, reflection, and communication (p. 121).” Academics, as Eric Hartman has argued, are, and should be, rightfully, partisans of democracy.

What I am suggesting here is that contributions to the public good without processes of collaboration and reciprocity, and explicit democratic purposes, do not compel institutional change.

“Transformational” contributions to the public good point to changes in the institutional culture of colleges and universities, or what Cuban identifies as “second-order changes” that “seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together. These changes reflect major dissatisfaction with present arrangements. Second-order changes introduce new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of doing things into new ways of solving persistent problems.” Second order changes are associated with transformational change, which Eckel, Hill, and Green discuss as cultural change focused on “institution-wide patterns of perceiving, thinking, and feeling; shared understandings; collective assumptions; and common interpretive frameworks.” Second Order change is aimed at changing the core academic culture of the campus.

Where do we see evidence of this “transformational” form of contributions to the public good?

One place is with campuses that have achieved the Carnegie Foundation’s Elective Community Engagement Classification. Currently, 361 campuses nationally hold the classification. The Classification defines engagement along the dimensions of process and purpose:

The classification defines community engagement in this way:

Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.

The classification was created by the Carnegie Foundation not as a way to simply create an institutional profile of what currently is - but to push campuses to change as they establish an institutional identity around community engagement. In order for engagement to be embedded in the cultures and structures of institutions of higher education, there needs to be changes in the way those institutions operate.

The documentation framework used for classification asks campus for evidence in three areas – Foundational Indicators (institutional culture and commitment), Curricular Engagement, and Outreach and Partnerships. The classification is asking for evidence in areas that require transformation in policies, structures, and practices, that fundamentally change the campus culture – areas such as assessment, reciprocal partnerships, faculty rewards, and integration and alignment with other institutional initiatives. On the last of these, “transformational” efforts contributing to the public good recognize that the full participation of everyone in the benefits of higher education means integrating programs around diversity, inclusion, and equity, with community engagement, and with student success.

It also means attending to the importance of creating an institutional environment that values contributions to the public good for a new generation of scholars coming into the academy, a generation of faculty – representative of what have been historically underrepresented populations – who have been publically engaged scholars as undergraduate and graduate students, and who have expectations for campuses that will allow them to thrive in engaged teaching, engaged research, and engaged service (This is the focus of the new book just published with colleagues on *Publicly Engaged Scholars: Next Generation engagement and the Future of Higher Education*). This is a generation of increasingly diverse scholars who are enacting networked knowledge generation that translates into collaborative research and active and collaborative teaching and learning, leading to the greater academic success of an increasing diverse undergraduate student body. As campuses make transformational contributions to the public good, there is support for next generation engaged faculty to raise questions of power, privilege, politics, positionality, identity, and implication in their teaching and scholarship.

There is considerable evidence of campuses in the Western Region and nationally that are enacting this kind of transformational contribution to the public good. As just one example, among the CSU campuses, 12 have the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, and of those 12, 8 have been re-classified, demonstrating a long-term commitment to change to enact engagement and the public good.

LEVEL 3: Thick Contributions to the Public Good.

It is at this level that I think we can invoke our understanding of aspirational and historical democracy to think about some deeper, more significant evidence for a commitment to the public good. Again, I think of Boyer when he wrote that we don't need more programs, what we need a larger sense of purpose. What might a larger sense of purpose look like?

I would also say that examples of “thick” contributions to the public good are not as abundant, but are more emergent.

One example might be that “Thick” contributions to the public good would provide evidence of rethinking the design and delivery of professional education. In his book *Democratic Professionalism* (2008), Albert Dzur re-conceptualizes professional

education in such a way that the role of the democratic professional is to facilitate the democratic values of task sharing and lay participation for building a wider public culture of democracy. So, evidence of contribution to the public good would be in the structure of professional programs, in their curriculum, and in their teaching and learning practices, whether they are fostering cooperation and creative problem solving by structuring learning environments for students to work and deliberate together, to learn the skills of facilitation, to develop not only technical expertise but civic competence. There would be evidence that students learn about democracy by practicing it. This kind of education for professional practice would, of course, be predicated on wide and diverse participation, drawing on the rich assets of knowledge and experience of individuals. So there would have to be evidence that the professional program has recruited and retained diverse faculty and students as well as reconceptualizing curriculum and pedagogy.

Another example of “thick” contributions to the public good would be in enacting a reframing of “merit.” We could look for this in admissions, mentoring, pedagogical practices, and in student support. Lani Guinier, in her 2015 book *The Tyranny of Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*, examines the way that merit has been defined almost exclusively by test scores, and the way merit serves as an incentive system that rewards the actions that the campus values. She challenges us to think about enacting what she calls “measures of democratic merit,” attributes such as “a student’s capacity to collaborate and to think creatively,” evidence of “teamwork and the fortification of strong collaborative relationships,” and qualities of “collaborative problem solving, independent thinking, and creative leadership” as well as “peer collaboration, [and] drive.”

Guinier writes that “the vast majority of institutions of higher education” say in their mission statements that their mission is to serve a public good. If, she writes, we were to “take them at their word,” then “admissions criteria should be continuously reassessed for the degree to which they help the institution and its constituents to make present and future contributions to society. That is, our democracy. Democratic merit does what our current meritocracy fails to do: it creates an incentive system that emphasizes the development of more and more individuals who serve the goals and contribute to the conditions of a thriving democracy for both their own good as well as for the collective good.”

A “thick” contribution by higher education to the public good would be to, as Guinier says, “reject the dominant narrative about intelligence: that it is fixed, inherent, and measured by tests” – and instead “redefine merit by those characteristics that indicate a student’s potential for future success in our democracy – leadership, the ability to collaborate with others, resiliency, and a drive to learn, among others” recognizing that “merit encompasses positive character traits such as communication, collaboration, and group leadership.”

We could look for evidence of democratic merit reflected in teaching and learning as well: “instead of working alone, students are encouraged to work together. Students become teachers and teammates. Classes show students that diverse perspectives can

collectively lead to better solutions.” In the end, we would measure whether students graduate displaying “a higher capacity to problem-solve, a greater demonstration of both leadership and peer collaboration, and an increase in fairness.” This is how the public good gets “thick.”

Let me close by returning to aspirational and historical perspectives on the public good. In 1996, twenty years ago, the American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote an essay called “Looking Backward from the Year 2096.” It wasn’t specifically about higher education, but American society broadly, yet I think it would be instructive for our purposes here to translate its meaning for higher education. So I want you to use your moral and public imagination to put yourself at this conference in 2096 to reflect higher education’s contributions to the public good.

Looking back from the year 2096, Rorty writes that the history of the US in the early 21st century was one of what he describes as “the breakdown of democratic institutions during the Dark Years (2014-2044)” – we are now in the Dark Years - which by the end of the century had led to a changed “sense of the relations between the moral order and the economic order.” He writes:

“Just as twentieth-century Americans had trouble imagining how their pre-Civil War ancestors could have stomached slavery, so we at the end of the twenty-first century have trouble imagining how our great-grandparents could have legally permitted a CEO to get 20 times more than her lowest paid employee. We cannot understand how Americans a hundred years ago could have tolerated the horrific contrast between a childhood spent in the suburbs and one spent in the ghettos. Such inequalities seem to us evident moral abominations, but the vast majority of our ancestors took them to be regrettable necessities.”

What was it that had instigated this moral, economic, and political realignment and revulsion toward these “evident moral abominations?” Rorty describes what we are all familiar with - “the gap between the educated and well paid and the uneducated and ill paid steadily widened” - “under the pressure of a globalized world economy, the gap between most American’s incomes and those of the lucky one-third at the top widened” resulting in intolerable “unequal distribution of wealth and income.”

In higher education’s Dark Years, those from high-income families were 8 times more likely to obtain a bachelors’ degree by age 24 than those from low-income families. The postsecondary system magnified and reproduced social stratification. For faculty, their livelihoods deteriorated and contingency became the norm. For students, debt rose to where, as Randy Martin has said, colleges and universities were no longer engines of opportunity, but instead had become engines of debt.

Yet, in Rorty’s construction of history, by the year 2096, the United States had come out of the Dark Years and there was a new political and economic order constructed of “social hope” based on “fellow feeling, the ability to sympathize with the

plight of others,” “a sense of American fraternity,” all “in the name of our common citizenship.”

What Rorty’s essay does not imagine is the contribution that higher education made in creating a new affirmation of the public good in which vast inequality and its consequences were treated as “evident moral abominations.”

I imagine that in 2096, presenters at this conference will be sharing ways in which their campuses had been fundamentally reinvented to address social issues that had shaped higher education through its “Dark Years”–

- Issues like immigration reform, such that campuses collaborated across sectors to ensure that all education was enacted as a human right, instead of an exclusion to common citizenship.
- Campus after campus partnered with pre-k-12 schools to end the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration that decimated opportunity for generations of minoritized youth.
- Hundreds of campuses collaborated with local, state, and national government agencies to end the criminalization of poverty.
- Campuses that didn’t reduce their own carbon footprint and assisted communities in reducing theirs were the aberration.
- And campuses ended their complicity with a tyranny of meritocracy based on test scores.

It was these issues and others that compelled campuses to interrogate their own implication in the ways in which power, privilege, and politics had exacerbated and contributed to deepening fundamentally anti-democratic racial and social injustice, and social and economic inequality, undermining any meaningful claim to upholding a commitment to the public good.

I imagine - with a sense of both urgency and optimism - that in the year 2096, there will be sessions at this conference providing examples of campuses

- that measured and extolled the civic competencies of their graduates,
- that celebrated the achievements of the democratic professionals they graduated,
- that moved beyond the learner-centered paradigm to a collaborative learning paradigm
- that had expanded practices around community partnerships to enact partnership communities, transcending generations through long-term commitments and formal obligations.
- that changed their admissions practices – and rose in global rankings because of it – because of their accounting for democratic merit,
- and examples of campuses that had not only fulfilled but had exceeded the WASC standards for accreditation that require ongoing and systematic documentation of ways in which campus practices contribute to increased social and economic equality.

I'd like you to imagine what it would mean for your campus to make these kinds of contributions to the public good.

This is what we can aspire to - and work towards.