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The Paradox of Democracy and Higher Education

At the heart of democracy lies a paradox. Democracy is dependent upon citizen participation, but if citizens, exercising the freedom that democracy permits, choose not to participate in the political life of the society, democracy by definition ceases to exist. Democracy rests fundamentally on the consent of the governed. Devoid of such consent, a society will no longer be a functioning democracy in any meaningful sense of the concept.

Democracy is widely seen as having its roots in ancient Greece and Rome. When those states failed, in large part because their civic structures atrophied, faith in democracy as a workable system collapsed. It would be 2000 years before an enduring democratic republic involving a nation state emerged with the founding of the United States. For much of the second half of the Twentieth Century, however, the world has witnessed what may be called an era of democratic triumphalism -- a belief that democracy is so obviously finest form of government that it is natural and inevitable. We needn't even do very much to cultivate it; we can simply watch it unfold.

Suddenly, however, we are not so certain about democracy's future. We see a world in which totalitarian impulses are literally at war with democratic impulses. The outcome of these conflicting impulses in many areas of the world is by no means certain. We see Americans drifting into a kind of privatism, at least when it comes to the public sphere and the political arena. Even when we are engaged with others in civically useful purposes, the activities are often outside the domain of politics, which itself invites taint and cynicism. The paradoxes of democracy and the fragility those paradoxes give rise to now seem disturbingly apparent. The echo chamber of media polarization unnerves us and undermines our confidence that we can agree on and collectively address the needs of what the philosopher, Hannah Arendt, called "our common world."

Higher education has appropriately attempted to respond to these concerns and to reinvigorate civic life. Much of this effort, however, is focused on what might be called "the doing" of civic engagement, by encouraging such activities as volunteerism and

voter registration. It is a noble effort, but I would argue that by itself it is insufficient. What is needed is a more foundational task, one in which well grounded conceptualizations of the way we care for one another as fellow citizens in a democracy and establish notions of our common well-being precede and support the sustained commitments of democratic life. Faculty, therefore, must be rethink the foundations of their own role in preparing students for democratic life. Let me frame this argument by connecting several seminal insights about democratic education.

To begin, it is worth realizing that American higher education has always been governed by at least four major purposes with respect to student learning. One purpose has been an emphasis on what is often described as liberal learning: the acquisition of broad awareness of cultural traditions and accumulated knowledge across disciplines, as well as the cultivation of the capacity for critical analysis and reflective thinking. Another purpose is professional development: the preparation of students to participate productively in economic life. Yet another purpose is self-development, which recognizes that education enables students to develop capabilities simply because they enrich their own lives. A final purpose is to prepare students for civic life. The first three of these purposes continue to be active components of teaching and curriculum development, the fourth, however, is now largely honored merely rhetorically. Almost every college catalog and every defense of higher education emphasizes the civic value of higher education. But as a matter of active, daily presence in curricula and teaching, preparation for civic life is rarely addressed substantively. This reflects an anemic commitment to the civic purposes of higher education. We simply assert that attendance in higher education will make people good citizens. There is little self-conscious conception of how the curriculum and teaching should formally facilitate the development of such citizenship.

There are many reasons why this is so, including such factors as the rise of empiricism, an emphasis on specialization within disciplines, an increased emphasis on professional education, and funding that depends more on immediate economic benefits than the more elusive qualities of human development (like citizenship), as well as the growing perception that an education is a private benefit, not a public good. The lack of attention to the civic purposes of higher education is, nevertheless, a comparatively recent development.

One of the historically distinctive contributions of American higher education is the development of *public* education, with its emphasis that in addition to the historic functions of the academy -- the accumulation of knowledge and the teaching of students - - institutions of higher education should also explicitly serve democratic life by preparing students to exhibit agency in self governance, not merely act as loyal subjects of the state. Higher education and the rise of democracy have been concomitant. It is no random coincidence that the signing of the Magna Carta (the event which signaled the slow, uneven ascent of democracy in the modern western world) and the establishment of Oxford University developed in such close temporal proximity to one another. The political system of democracy and the free inquiry that is central to our conception of higher education have been handmaidens that have fueled the development of one another, wherever they have existed.

The first Academy, for example, was established by Plato in ancient Athens in 387 BC. Again it is not a coincidence that this occurred as democracy flourished there. Although, there is some irony here in that Plato was no supporter of democracy. He feared its paradoxes would devolve into anarchy and mob rule, or control by coalitions of special interests, or produce a tyrannical leader to assure order, any of which would destroy the very freedoms democracy is intended to preserve. He did, nevertheless, offer a seminal insight relevant to the relationship between education and democracy. He recognized that every system of governance embodies an educational philosophy. Every society, he reasoned, must prepare its citizens to participate effectively in the form of governance under which they live, by providing them with the knowledge to meet the requirements it demands of them.

Democracy has its own set of requirements. Its citizens must have the knowledge and skills to actively participate in democratic self governance. As Thomas Jefferson believed, "In a democracy citizens cannot be both ignorant and free. To want this is to want what never has been or ever will be." His observation undergirds the insight on which public education is constructed. Democracy also requires the civic commitments that lead people to be willing and able to accept political leadership in settings from local to national levels. Here too, Jefferson understood what was at stake, when he observed that, "In a democracy we get the kind of government we deserve." Jefferson's

perceptions were widely shared and led to the development of public higher education in the United States.

Many U. S. presidents have presented dramatic proposals to advance public higher education. In his first Inaugural Address, Washington proposed creating a publically funded national university to train leaders for a democracy, although sectional fears prevented its establishment. But universities at the state level did develop. In 1820, a then retired President Jefferson, following fledgling efforts in other states, founded the University of Virginia, generally seen as the first full-scale public university. Lincoln endorsed the Morrill Act of 1862, which created public land grant universities across the country. These universities were intended to provide service by sharing knowledge of practical value with the community. As a result, a commitment to service became another original hallmark of American public higher education. And Franklin D. Roosevelt, secured passage of the G.I. Bill, which led to a dramatic expansion of public higher education.

These then are the unique contributions of American higher education: the establishment of the first public universities; the subsequent expansion of the number of those universities around the nation; the assertion of a service role for public universities impelling them to share knowledge for public benefit; and the active expansion of the opportunity for mass participation in higher education. Running through all these innovations is a common theme—that education has a decisive role in creating the civically capable, engaged citizens on which democracy depends for its very existence. Our democracy would clearly be less vital without these features of higher education.

Fifty years after Plato had done so, Aristotle created another early forerunner of the modern university through his Lyceum in ancient Athens. Aristotle is preeminently thought of as providing an explication of the “ethics of virtue” in personal life. He emphasized the cultivation of virtue as the means by which we live flourishing lives. It should be equally understood, however, that he also recognized the necessity of participating in the life of society as indispensable to the capacity to live a flourishing life. His is a social formulation in which living a “good life” depends extensively on being a “good citizen” in a “good society.” Aristotle believed that we have a capacity and an obligation to shape our private character as well as the character of our community. He

understood that there is an inescapable interdependence between private destinies and public well-being. If this sounds abstract, then imagine trying to live a flourishing life in a completely degraded society.

In the 1820s, a young visitor from France, Alexis de Tocqueville, traveled extensively in the United States. He admired the participation in public life that he described as a kind of civic religion in the United States. He also identified something more worrisome for the future of democracy lying in the shadows. He feared that as democracy satisfied citizens' need for self-determination and the well-being it engenders, they would retreat from the public square into their own private lives -- each would become a kind of fief in his own domain. If that transpired the very qualities that made American democracy so vibrant would be undermined. He saw the potential haunting paradox of democracy.

That paradox confronts higher education today. The question for faculty is how to explore the foundations of civic responsibility in ways that productively acknowledge the paradoxes and the requirements of democratic life in ways that compellingly prepare our students for the civic commitments that they will need to exhibit. Let me suggest three domains of awareness that are essential for mature civic functioning, and which I believe should guide faculty thinking about curricula and teaching with regard to civic responsibility.

Civic education, when it occurs (which is typically at the secondary level) generally includes knowledge about the rudimentary but necessary features of democratic life: rights of free speech, free sources of information, free association, choosing and holding leaders accountable through elections, etc. But civic learning involves more than knowledge of *what* we must know and *how* we must behave to make democracy work; it also requires a deeper realization of *why* we should make democratic life work. An understanding of *why* democracy matters generates for students the will to understand how to make democracy work. Following from this logic at least three foundational principles emerge that require extensive exploration. *The first is an understanding that private and public destinies are inseparable.* A societal emphasis on individualism, combined with material abundance, often leads Americans to naively overlook the fundamental necessity of interdependence and the extent to which life is sustained in

community with others. Moreover, although highly mobile social patterns enable Americans to periodically reinvent themselves, we nevertheless achieve our identity to an overwhelming extent through collective, institutional life. *Second, it therefore follows that if we are so largely dependent on social life for the success of our private destinies, then public well-being is a private necessity.* Until this is fully comprehended, an indifference to common well-being can lead to a kind of cultural nihilism. *Third, in a democracy, we must understand that public well-being is achieved by citizen participation.* Without civic participation, there is by definition no democracy. Without democracy, the means to collectively address issues of common concern disappear.

Exploring these considerations is a holistic, interdisciplinary effort. Attending to them in our teaching can lead students to apprehend the meaning of these principles for their own lives. The convictions that emerge from them can encourage the constructive engagement in democratic life that we as faculty must actively cultivate in our students, if we are to remain faithful to the historic traditions that gave rise to public higher education, and to serve the most fundamental needs of democracy.

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