



Catalyst Paper #1¹

Why it is imperative to strengthen American democracy through study, dialogue, and change in higher education

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Commentators on US civil society point to several concerns that threaten the health and effectiveness of American democracy: the highest levels of economic inequality since the 1920s; persistent patterns of disparity and injustice associated with race and class; citizen disengagement from politics and the adversarial nature of public policy making; a public increasingly polarized by differences in values, political ideology, faith, and social identity; and everyday acts of intolerance, incivility, selfishness, and unethical behavior.

Whether they have been denied access to social and political power or have simply opted out, *all* citizens should be afforded the opportunity – and should feel a sense of responsibility – to work to address local, national, and global matters. There is much work to be done. The nation's issues are too complex and far-reaching – consider climate change, terrorism, and global economics – and too persistent – consider poverty, crime, racism, and health care disparities – and too divisive – consider immigration, affirmative action, abortion, and gay marriage – to be

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² This document was drafted by Nancy L. Thomas as the framing paper for the initial Democracy Imperative conference in June 2007. TDI founding board members Shelby Brown, Ande Diaz, Michele Holt-Shannon, Peter Levine, Bruce Mallory, Sheila McNamee, David Schoem, and Pat Scully contributed significantly to the draft. It was then subject to review by all TDI members. Special thanks to Chris Karpowitz, Harry Boyte, and Jamie Bemis for reviewing earlier drafts.

managed by a political elite alone. Persistent problems call for study, productive civil discourse and collective action by an educated, informed, and vigilant citizenry.

Americans need to know and do more to strengthen democracy - democracy envisioned a particular way. Democracy is most often described as a form of government that is of, by, and for the people. However, democracy is more than a form of government. In a strong and effective democracy, citizens interact and work together in community to improve society according to a particular set of principles and practices. This might best be described as a *deliberative democracy*.

A deliberative democracy has certain characteristics: an educated and informed citizenry, inclusive social and political systems, and vigorous participation of ordinary citizens in community life and public policy making. Citizens discuss and critique laws and public policies. Dissent is not only welcome; it evidences citizen involvement and is understood as an act of patriotism. Policy makers in a deliberative democracy are responsive to ideas generated through public deliberation. People see their will reflected in policy solutions. Citizens work together to build their communities to achieve shared ideals. A vibrant deliberative democracy is grounded in freedom, justice, and equity.

Many Americans seem confused about what democracy is and complacent about their personal responsibilities in a democracy. Some mistakenly describe democracy as a system of majority rule, but majority rule is merely a system where the voting majority rules on behalf of those who are already in power. Yet democracy cannot flourish when those in power alienate particular groups of people and fail to serve the general public interest. When groups are excluded from political and social majorities – historically women, people of color, immigrants, and the poor – the result is governance by a cultural elite. When patterns of economic and racial injustice persist, democratic principles are not realized.

Over the past few years, citizens have once again begun to assert themselves as active participants in democratic life through inclusive and respectful dialogue, thoughtful public reasoning, conflict transformation, collective decision and policymaking, and social action. These approaches, constituting the arts of deliberative democracy, have emerged as the antidotes to exclusion, disengagement, polarization, and incivility. Across the country, thousands of ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds and perspectives are participating in study circles, intergroup dialogues, action forums, and public conversations on pressing social issues. These are promising developments. But *thousands* in a pool of millions is not enough. Much work needs to be done to achieve the democratic principles of freedom, justice, and equity and to ensure that the arts of deliberative democracy are “the way we do our work” in American society. The deliberative democracy movement is a convergence of significant trends in our aspirational democracy, in which cyclical efforts to engage citizens in public life *and* ongoing efforts to promote equity and justice combine to make our social and political systems inclusive, fair, and accessible.

Higher Education's Role in a Deliberative Democracy

Much has been said about higher education's role in American society. Universities and colleges have been the traditional venue for scholarly communities of liberal learning and critical intellectual exploration. They are the premier think tanks for cutting-edge research and development. Higher education is also critical to national economic growth as well as individual career development and upward mobility. And over the past twenty years, higher education has worked hard to provide equity and access to historically underrepresented groups and to explore ways to educate students for responsible citizenship. The diversity and civic engagement movements in higher education, for instance, manifest themselves in myriad programs and activities on campuses, as illustrated in the two lists below.

Diversity

- Financial aid programs
- Affirmative action policies
- Outreach to community colleges, urban schools, poor communities – creating a pipeline for historically underrepresented students
- Interdisciplinary, multicultural studies
- Educational interventions for at-risk students
- Living and learning residential communities with multicultural themes
- Multicultural Pedagogies
- Speakers, events, celebrations
- Intergroup dialogue programs
- Community conversations on race or ethnic diversity
- Campus Climate transformation
- Curricular Change
- Research Centers and Institutes

Institution as Citizen

- Student volunteer programs
- Institutional centers for service
- Service learning courses
- Service learning and other interactive pedagogies
- Semester-long "service experiences"
- Senior seminars, capstones
- Experiential Learning
- Student activism
- Faculty outreach
- Urban or rural renewal partnerships
- Participatory action scholarship
- Community-based learning
- Research centers and institutes
- College-Community Partnerships
- Student-faculty collaborative research
- Cooperative extension and adult education
- Clinical programs
- Public access to facilities
- AmeriCorps/City Year partnerships

However, educators who support these programs express concern that they are marginal and disconnected from today's primary focus of higher education. All too often, programs like these are not integrated into the mainstream activities and units of campus. Rather, they rely heavily on the hard work of a few individuals, a finite grant, or a small program. Their absence from mainstream conceptions of higher education is evidenced in the 2006 Spellings Commission Report on the Future of Higher Education, which made no reference to these critical components of liberal learning.

Clearly, every college president and board is "for" civic engagement, diversity, and democracy, but few organize their institutional practices in a way that would suggest that they take that mandate seriously. The term "democracy" is not in most institutional mission statements. It is not clear that existing programs affect more than a minority of students, and it is not

clear that students in general are changing their attitudes toward matters of equity, justice, and civic engagement as a result of their college experiences. Nearly 90% of all college students report that they attend college “to get a better job.” More students may be involved in community service, but few are developing the passion for or skills needed for taking on the social and political inequities that give rise to the need for community service. It is unusual to find an institution where diversity and civic education offices are connected and their work integrated. Structurally, colleges and universities rarely model exemplary democratic practices, as evidenced by the entrenched promotion and tenure systems, disciplinary silos, and hierarchical power structures. Institutional leaders are consumed by the need to raise money or defend a decision or manage a crisis. Institutional leaders rarely serve as public voices for democratic principles and practices.

Perhaps most discouraging is that, despite these *current* efforts, national patterns of socio-economic inequality, polarization based on social identity and ideology, acts of intolerance and incivility, social and political disengagement, and, more recently, environmental deterioration, persist.

Meanwhile, levels of public participation – from membership in associations, to attending meetings, to voting – are declining or remain chronically low. Some observers attribute this to complacency or time constraints on the part of the public. However, most people who retreat from political activity do so because they feel pushed out of systems that seem alienating, unresponsive and/or irrelevant to their concerns and aspirations.

What is called for is not necessarily an increase in the number of programs or a heavier workload for educators. Rather, there is a need to examine current practices and to align them with the principles and practices of democracy in all programs and activities, a *shift* in the way colleges and universities do their work. Colleges and universities need a renewed understanding of and commitment to education for democracy perceived and practiced a certain way: as a set of principles and practices that guide how people interact and work together to improve society. Our challenge is in three areas:

- Understanding and recommitting to the *centrality of deliberative democracy* as a valued set of principles and practices in our colleges and universities.
- *Promoting democratic principles and practice* in curriculum, pedagogy, co-curricula, and scholarship through inclusive and respectful dialogue, thoughtful reasoning, conflict transformation, collective decisions and policymaking, and social action – all across differences in social identity, values, experiences, and perspectives.
- *Modeling democracy* in institutional governance and decision-making processes as well as in the form and content of community-university partnerships.

Understanding Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Principles

What are the necessary conditions of a strong and effective democracy? What are its philosophical roots and contemporary practices? How is deliberative democracy distinct? Does it work? What needs to happen to make it work as effectively as possible?

Colleges and universities seem to have a truncated view of democracy as a form of government rather than a set of principles and practices. This needs to change. Students should study, critique, and understand *why* freedom, justice, and equity are essential to a strong and effective democracy. They should analyze the extent to which our systems of popular representation and government reflect our democratic values. For example, they should engage issues of free speech and academic freedom. They should understand how the ideas and policies that guide our economic lives are intertwined with systems of politics and governance. They need to know the origins, uses, and abuses of power in any democratic system, and our constitutional system specifically. Students should understand the sources of current power disparities as well as how to respond to them effectively. They should know the history of civil rights in this country and the legacy of structural and systemic racism and economic injustice. They should study changing populations and issues of sustainability in the United States and globally as well as their implications for all aspects of public life. They should be familiar with the values and strategies that animate democratic movements throughout the world. They should explore these issues from an interdisciplinary perspective and in local and global contexts. They should understand how to analyze these perspectives from multiple points of view that encompass diverse and conflicting disciplinary traditions, political ideologies and cultural values. As they gain knowledge, students need to explore their own values and how they will make the personal choices in their career, home, or communities that affect the lives of others and that have consequences for freedom, justice, and equity more broadly.

The responsibility for this shift lies with faculty across disciplines and with academic administrators who are responsible for curricular reform and support. This task does not rest solely with political science or sociology departments. The task requires an orientation that needs to be infused across liberal and professional programs. While new interdisciplinary programs that address the big questions of social interaction and political change may help, such programs are often marginalized in the academy. They need to be designed in ways that reach the majority of students, not just those who migrate to them.

Promoting Democratic Practice

How does inclusive dialogue differ from ordinary conversation? What are the ground rules for dialogue across differences of social identity and personal ideology? How does dialogue on campus and in the community differ from dialogue in the classroom? What is the difference between critical thinking and public reason? How do groups reach decisions and affect policy? How

do they transform conflict into an opportunity? What leadership skills are needed to move dialogue to action?

Not only should students graduate knowing about democracy's core principles, they should also know that democracy is not a passive concept to be studied but an active process to be practiced. Colleges and universities need to prepare students for active participation and leadership in a democratic society.

Colleges and universities are ideal venues to explore and learn approaches to intergroup dialogue. Dialogue is used to, (1) change individual behavior and attitudes, particularly to increase intercultural understanding and tolerance (2) confront and address historic and contemporary social injustice, (3) increase civility and respect, (4) build community and networks, (5) change institutions such as governments and workplaces, and (6) change the way public policy decisions are made. Democratic dialogue might best be viewed as a means to an end, to a more deliberative democracy. As noted above, democratic dialogue is grounded in certain principles. It is inclusive, respectful and governed by ground rules, peer facilitated, reflective, and expressed through personal experience and perspectives. This kind of dialogue is the essential characteristic of a strong deliberative democracy.

Colleges and universities can start by including "collective" or "public" reasoning as an essential outcome of student learning. "Public reason" is a term most often used by political philosophers and cultural theorists. It might best be described as a democratic ideal, one that allows for an open and reciprocal dialogic process of sharing, exploring, and critiquing values, perspectives, and opinions with a view to finding common ground and shared perspectives on an issue. Sometimes, public reasoning is linked to debate or advocacy work, and always in a political context. We propose a slightly different employment of the term – a process that is not only designed to shape political decisions but that can also be used to promote social action and build communities in ways that are cooperative, not adversarial. It is a form of respectful and open-minded inquiry that leads to individual and common commitments to shared solutions.

Much of this work can be linked to communication and conflict resolution strategies. It is important to teach students to face conflict directly and to find productive ways to manage conflict. That does not mean that all processes will lead to harmonious outcomes; to the contrary, college students will learn that transforming conflict to opportunity calls for courage and judgment and that adversity is not always a negative. Negotiating conflict is a process of relationship building, attention to interpersonal dynamics, and the generation of productive outcomes that do not sacrifice one for the many.

Colleges and universities need to make inclusive dialogue, public reasoning, conflict transformation, and social policymaking and action across difference

central to the curriculum and to student activities. Campuses must also create “safe” spaces for study, dialogue, and collaborative action on pressing social, ethical, economic, and political issues. They need to study and address persistent barriers of race, class, ability, and gender. They need to understand the difference between inclusive dialogue that is transformative and everyday conversations. They need to be attentive to the interpersonal dynamics of a group, and they need to identify common ground before moving to action.

Practicing the arts of democracy can be infused across disciplines, and it can be built into nearly all structures on campus, such as student clubs and activities, athletic programs, cultural and intellectual events, residential life, and volunteer opportunities. There are *no* venues on campus that could not be practice grounds for democracy.

Modeling Democracy

Colleges and universities are venues where democracy must be practiced and modeled. The time is long past when the oft-stated claim that “colleges and universities are not democracies” should be accepted as uncontested truth.

“Shared governance processes” are fairly easy to understand in theory and have been articulated by the American Association of University Professors, among others. Indeed, some colleges and universities do address institutional issues and make change by opening the process, actively seeking diverse perspectives, encouraging assessment, weighing and testing choices, and conceptualizing reform as an ongoing process rather than a set outcome. Most, however, are increasingly susceptible to the complexities of the “corporate business” of higher education and are managed in ways that are anything but democratic.

How higher education does its business must reflect more closely the ideals of an actively engaged and informed citizenry that it seeks to instill in its students. We call for study, dialogue and change with respect to how decisions are made, who decides, and how power is distributed and exercised.

Where We Go from Here

Americans must be vigilant about – and can be effective in – strengthening democracy, one where all people, particularly those previously excluded from social and political structures have a voice that is heard. We believe that colleges and universities can provide venues and resources that will empower the voices of citizens—students, faculty, staff, and community members—through the practices of deliberative democracy.

We propose the following steps to address this knowledge and skill gap:

1. *Create a community of practice/learning network for community-based practitioners and academics.* Members of this network will be people

whose common feature is their concern for the improvement and preservation of deliberative forms of democracy through higher education. They will share resources and work together to deepen their knowledge of the tools of dialogue as means for strengthening democracy. They will provide support and guidance to campuses interested in deepening the study and practice of democracy. They will share deliberative practices and work together to overcome problems and barriers. They will visit campuses and conduct assessments. They will engage in policy-relevant dialogue about higher education's role in a democracy. The goal is to stimulate study, reflection, dialogue, and change in all areas of practice, including curriculum and co-curriculum, pedagogy, research, administration, and decision-making.

2. *Study and disseminate knowledge.* Efforts to advance a stronger and more effective democracy must be guided by knowledge. Researchers can create assessment tools and learning processes to gather data, collect illustrative narratives and follow-up on activities from campuses. The goals would be to learn more about existing campus activities that work, to assess an institution's capacity for change, and to develop benchmarks for success. This knowledge would be used to advocate for more effective forms of deliberation and change with institutional leaders and individual educators.

Colleges and universities can do more than talk about the history of and challenges to American freedom, justice, and equality. They can play a more significant role in examining public policy and government actions and challenging those that seem to by-pass or override democratic principles and practices. They can address the need for more knowledge and foster more passionate and principled citizen engagement. They can teach the language of deliberative democracy and link that teaching to practice. This network will cultivate a field of practice for advancing deliberative democracy through higher education. It will provide committed practitioners and scholars with an opportunity to work together to deepen their own work while simultaneously reforming higher education. In doing so, The Democracy Imperative will help move this nation toward a stronger public life and more effective democracy.