

The Formative Politics of Outreach Scholarship

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Abstract

In recent years, a movement aimed at renewing the civic mission of American higher education has emerged. What are the implications of this aim for the nature and practice of outreach scholarship? Grounded in an analysis of our contemporary civic crisis that emphasizes the importance of the formative project of civic education, this paper calls for a view of outreach scholarship as “public scholarship.” Such a scholarship has deep historical roots in state and land-grant universities. Its renewal in our time will require outreach scholars to infuse public service and outreach work with a civic rather than a market spirit, explicitly incorporating deliberation on questions of civic purpose, while also providing opportunities for serious, substantial contributions and participation from a wide variety of people.

Introduction

Today there is widespread preoccupation in our society with the twin pursuits of national economic growth and individual economic mobility. But there is another pursuit that urgently deserves our attention: the pursuit of civic renewal. While higher education’s role in advancing the former pursuits routinely receives a great deal of attention, concern for civic renewal has been relatively neglected. With the issuing of the *Presidents’ Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* in July 1999 by Campus Compact and the distinguished Presidents’ Leadership Colloquium Committee, this neglect has perhaps come to an end. The declaration, which to date has been endorsed by over 400 presidents from a broad range of institutions, calls for a “national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education” (Ehrlich and Hollander 1999).

While there is great promise in the emerging movement to renew higher education’s civic mission, there is also a sobering reality that must be confronted. As William Sullivan, a senior scholar with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues in a compelling essay, American higher education has come to operate on a default program of “instrumental individualism” that ignores explicit consideration of larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose. This default program, he writes,

“is the familiar notion that the academy exists to research and disseminate knowledge and skills as tools for economic development and the upward mobility of individuals” (Sullivan 2000, 21). Grounded in this industrial-market conception of its function, higher education has, in Sullivan’s view, lost the animating sense of civic purpose and identity it held at the start of the twentieth century. In order to inspire and inform efforts to renew higher education’s civic mission at the start of the twenty-first century, he calls for a reinterpretation of its earlier sense of civic purpose and identity.

Of all the sectors in American higher education, the state and land-grant university system provides perhaps the best ground upon which we might test both the accuracy of Sullivan’s critique and the potential of his call for a reinterpretation of traditions of civic purpose. Over the past decade, we have seen significant efforts to deepen and expand the public service and outreach work of state and land-grant institutions, with impressive results at places like Penn State, Michigan State, and Oregon State universities. Do these efforts represent a renewal of civic purpose and identity, or do they simply reflect an enhanced commitment to pursue the default program of instrumental individualism? How might such efforts serve as both catalysts and vehicles for the renewal of civic purpose and identity? What, if anything, of relevance to our time can be learned here from a reinterpretation of history?

Answering these important questions will take a good deal of research and deliberation. In this brief paper, I discuss three things that relate to their pursuit: first, how we might frame our understanding of the crisis in contemporary American civic life; second, what the implications of this framing are for public service and outreach work; and finally, what lessons and insights a reinterpretation of history might offer.

Framing Our Civic Crisis

While much of the fast-growing literature on the widely perceived crisis in American civic life focuses on the problem of declining participation rates and rising incivility (e.g., Carter 1998; Putman 2000), the crisis also has an important philosophical dimension. Harvard professor of government Michael Sandel turns his attention to this dimension in *Democracy’s Discontent* (1996), a richly detailed study of the historical transformation of America’s public philosophy. Sandel writes that two major concerns lie at the heart of our contemporary civic crisis: the fear that we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives, and the sense that the moral

fabric of the community is unraveling around us. He argues that we have embraced an impoverished view of citizenship and public life that has given rise to a “procedural republic” that is incapable of addressing these concerns. The procedural republic rests on a public philosophy grounded in a minimalist version of liberal political theory. Minimalist liberalism gives priority to individual rights, views people as freely choosing, unencumbered selves, and professes neutrality toward the values and ends citizens pursue. Sandel contrasts the minimalist liberalism of the procedural republic with a version of republican political theory he believes is essential for addressing our civic crisis. The republicanism Sandel describes centers on the formative project of cultivating in citizens the capacities and qualities of character necessary for participation in a type of self-government that aims more at protecting and enhancing the common good than at securing procedural rights.

While Sandel’s analysis has been vigorously debated from a variety of perspectives (Allen and Regan 1998), his work does offer a powerful (and, I believe, largely accurate) way of framing our contemporary civic crisis. This framing tells us that our civic crisis is not

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merely about declining participation rates, but also about a clash of underlying philosophies that inform our fundamental notions of civic purpose and identity. Are we—and do we want to be—a nation of unencumbered individuals freely pursuing our own self-interests? Is the main function of government to provide and protect the procedural rights that allow each of us to pursue our individual interests while ensuring that the marketplace is filled with an ever-growing cornucopia of goods and services? Or is there both a yearning for and an urgent need to create a public life that defends and protects individual liberty while it also provides opportunities for the development of the civic virtues, spirit, and capacities necessary for attending to the health of the commonwealth?

These are high-stakes questions. As the bipartisan National Commission on Civic Renewal warned in their final report, “In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a

nation of spectators” (1998, 6). The remedy for this danger, it seems to me, requires an embrace of the formative project of educating people for active citizenship. For higher education to contribute to this project it must overcome its default mode of instrumental individualism, which closely mirrors the minimalist liberalism of the procedural republic, and renew a robust understanding of its civic identity and mission.

Implications for Public Service and Outreach Work

The formative project of civic education in higher education has long been tied to a classroom-based liberal education curriculum for undergraduates. While this is surely important, this formative project can also be vigorously and effectively pursued through public service and outreach work. We have seen evidence of this in recent decades in the service-learning movement (*Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999*). But beyond an undergraduate-focused service-learning, how else might the formative project be pursued in public service and outreach work? Might it also be pursued through research partnerships with communities and businesses?

I believe it can be. But to do so, such partnerships cannot be defined narrowly, as they too often are today, as neutral service provision focused exclusively on advancing technical efficiency and economic productivity and mobility. Rather, they must take on a robust civic character that encourages a focus on enhancing the commonwealth. In other words, public service and outreach work with businesses and communities must shift from a procedural politics that emphasizes only economic development and upward mobility, reinforcing Sullivan’s default mode of instrumental individualism, to a formative politics that while not abandoning concern for economics, technical efficiency, and mobility, also places such concerns and aims in relation to larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose.

With this point in mind we can see the potential inadequacy of the bold new call for “engaged institutions” put forward by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. On the surface, the commission’s call for “engagement” looks as if it marks a renewal of a robust civic mission. In its 1999 report, *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged University*, the commission defined engagement as “two-way partnerships, reciprocal relationships between university and community, defined by mutual respect

for the strengths of each,” where the “purpose of engagement is not to provide the university’s superior expertise to the community, but to encourage joint academic-community definitions of problems, solutions, and success” (*Kellogg Commission 1999, 30, 29*). While this view of engagement points to a welcome shift away from one-way, expert-dominated understandings of university outreach work, it does not necessarily represent a shift away from the default mode of instrumental individualism. Unless engagement is tied to a commitment to place social, political, and moral aims on the table as serious and legitimate concerns for scholarly work, the “engaged institution” idea might simply reinforce the procedural, customer service-oriented politics of the existing default mode.

The task—and the challenge—before us is to infuse public service and outreach work with a civic rather than a

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market spirit; with a formative rather than a procedural, service-delivery politics. To do this, we will need to develop a theory and practice of outreach scholarship that explicitly incorporates deliberation on questions of civic purpose, while also providing opportunities for serious, substantial contributions and participation from a wide variety of people. Such a scholarship might be called a public scholarship. Public scholarship would view outreach scholarship as public work, the creative intellectual work of a diverse range of people that produces things of lasting public value (*Boyte and Kari 1996*). Its products would include more than knowledge and technologies useful for advancing economic growth. It would also include the development of the enhanced civic capacities, spirit, and character necessary for addressing tough public issues and problems. It would aim not just at knowledge creation and dissemination, but also at *wisdom*, understood as the ability to realize what is of value (*Maxwell 1984*). To imagine where and how public scholarship might prove to be especially valuable, consider the many civic, environmental, and ethical challenges raised by the pursuit of sustainability in agriculture (*Röling and Wagemakers, 1998*).

Historical Traditions

Public scholarship is not an unfamiliar idea in state and land-grant universities. In fact, these universities have a rich historical tradition of such scholarship and it is practiced at the margins even today, especially in land-grant institutions. The seeds of the tradition were planted in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. It flowered in the period before World War II, although almost as soon as it was born it was marginalized by a variety of forces, including an early version of the contemporary default mode of instrumental individualism. At its best, this tradition pushed beyond the pursuit of individual self-interests and exhortations of civic virtue. It organized scholars and ordinary people in collaborative public work that addressed practical, down-to-earth interests and problems, but not in a way that disconnected such work from a larger ideal or aim: namely, the building of a vibrant, satisfying democratic rural life and culture.

Today, little is known of the public scholarship tradition in land-grant education. The story of its birth and marginalization remains untold. Yet retrieval and reinterpretation of this tradition is vitally important to the contemporary task of developing public service and outreach work that strengthens and advances the civic purpose and identity of state and land-grant universities. This retrieval and reinterpretation is the central focus of my own research.

Liberty Hyde Bailey, the accomplished scientist and pioneering dean of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University (1903–1913), was perhaps the greatest proponent and prophet of public scholarship in state and land-grant institutions. Bailey understood that the central promise of the land-grant idea is a *democratic* promise that can be pursued only by integrating the liberal and practical elements of land-grant education. Pointing to the deep importance of the formative project of civic education in both resident education and extension and outreach work, Bailey proclaimed that:

It is not sufficient to train technically in the trades and crafts and arts to the end of securing greater economic efficiency—this may be accomplished in a despotism and result in no self-action on the part of the people. Every democracy must reach far beyond what is commonly known as economic efficiency, and do everything it can to enable those in the backgrounds to maintain their standing and their pride and to partake in the making of political affairs. (1915, 41)

Bailey's point, articulated as early as 1915 as a defense against an encroaching instrumental default mode, was embraced by the cooperative extension service. Established at the national level in 1914 through the Smith-Lever Act, cooperative extension provided an institutionalized means for organizing community-university partnerships in which public scholarship could take root. The strong embrace of a formative politics of public work in extension is evident in the following passage from the first national survey of land-grant institutions, a comprehensive two-volume study published in 1930 by the federal Office of Education:

The ultimate objective was not more and better food, clothing, and housing. These were merely means and conditions prerequisite to improvement of human relationships, of intellectual and spiritual outlook. Apparent preoccupation with economic interests must be interpreted in terms of the purposes that material welfare is intended to serve. The fundamental function of Smith-Lever extension education is the development of rural people themselves. This is accomplished by fostering attitudes of mind and capacities which will enable them to better meet the individual and civic problems with which they are confronted. Unless economic attainment and independence are regarded chiefly as means for advancing the social and cultural life of those living in the open country, the most important purpose of extension education will not be achieved. (*Klein 1930, 442*)

Expanded beyond a focus on rural people and communities to include urban and suburban as well, this passage holds as compelling a vision for a civic mission as we could hope for today. It must be acknowledged that this vision has never been fully realized. Perhaps it never will be. Yet I believe the wisdom it captures is still powerful and true enough to inspire new efforts to pursue it in our time.

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Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the keynote address at the Outreach and Cooperative Extension Leader's Retreat, Penn State University, June 14, 2000. I want to thank Harry Boyte for his helpful comments on this paper, and for his continuing inspiration.

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Scott J. Peters is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Cornell University. His teaching and extension work at Cornell focus on civic renewal, community education and development, youth development, and public issues education. His research is devoted to exploring the historical foundations, evolution, and contemporary renewal of cooperative extension's civic mission and public work tradition, and their connection to the democratic promise of the land-grant idea in American higher education. He is conducting a national research project, supported by the Kettering Foundation, on the theory and practice of public scholarship at land-grant colleges and universities. Dr. Peters also serves as a consulting editor to *Adult Education Quarterly*.