

DIVERSITY, DEMOCRACY, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

Higher Education and Its Unique Opportunity

By Debra Humphreys

At the beginning of a new century, America is basking in a period of unprecedented economic prosperity. Papers are filled with stories about American-style democratic systems sweeping the globe. Americans at home, however, are engaged in two national conversations that are much less sanguine about the health of our nation. These two conversations have been largely separate, but both are marked by a tenor of urgency. One conversation involves civic and political disengagement and the other involves diversity, hate, and separation.

I would like to suggest that higher education has a role to play responding to the concerns at the heart of both of these conversations. In fact, colleges and universities across the country are already developing a new set of educational strategies that holds great promise for addressing these pressing national concerns. I will also argue, however, that bringing these two conversations together is critical to bringing our nation together and to revitalizing a sense of community both at the local and the national levels. I believe that encouraging greater public engagement in civic life requires that we pay much closer attention to issues of diversity.

Readers of this journal will be all too familiar with the tenor and thrust of the first national conversation about civic engagement. Commentators in this publication and many others have expressed alarm at a perceived decline in civic engagement, especially among young people. Alexander Astin puts it this way,

Something is terribly wrong with the state of American democracy. Most citizens don't vote, negative campaigning reigns, and public distrust, contempt, and hostility toward "government" have reached unprecedented heights. Student interest and engagement in politics are at all-time lows, according to the most recent surveys. . . . While academics occasionally comment on this sorry state of affairs, they seldom suggest that higher education may have played a part

in creating these problems, or that it can or should do anything about them.

In one of the most influential articles on this topic, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” Robert Putnam argues that Americans increasingly distrust public institutions, no longer actively participate in politics, and are less likely than ever to join civic groups. Since this influential article was published, several commentators have expressed skepticism about the evidence of civic disengagement. Putnam, however, is about to release a new book that expands on the arguments he made in the article and promises to provide additional data to support the general thesis of America’s declining engagement in at least some traditional forms of public life.

We may indeed need to look more closely at how Americans are, or are not, engaging in public life, but there seems to be no denying that especially young Americans are cynical about traditional democratic institutions and their ability to contribute lasting solutions to the nation’s pressing problems. It also seems clear that higher education needs to be more engaged in efforts to reinvigorate civic life in America. Many higher education leaders have recognized this need and are mobilizing to address it. One prominent effort has brought together leaders from research universities and education associations and has issued a declaration designed to spur action on the part of colleges and universities. “The Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University” calls for colleges and universities to revitalize their campus cultures through a renewed commitment to serving the needs of their communities and the nation as a whole. The organization for which I work, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is part of this group and a signatory to this declaration.

While I certainly agree that higher education has a role to play in reinvigorating American civic life, we need to go beyond a renewed sense of civic mission for universities or the creation of more opportunities for students to become civically engaged during their college years. College educators also need to embed issues of diversity *and* democracy throughout the undergraduate curriculum. We need to teach today’s students not only about the structures of American democratic systems, but also the history of America’s failures to ensure democratic rights and privileges for all its citizens. These failures, combined with the changing demo-

graphics of the country require us, in fact, to think differently about this challenge of reinvigorating civic life and about the specific role colleges and universities can play in addressing it.

To meet this challenge effectively, we need to pay attention to the other national conversation about diversity, hate, and separation to which I refer above. Higher education leaders are also already responding to calls for action at the heart of *this* conversation, which fundamentally is about the nation's response to its increasing diversity and the increasing power and voice of various minority populations.

Many mainstream public commentators have expressed alarm about a rise in acts of violence motivated by prejudice and discrimination. Hate crimes legislation is being debated in state legislatures across the country and in Congress. These actions and President Clinton's Initiative on Race respond to a concern among the general public. Public opinion measures suggest that the American public is alarmed at the fact that Americans seem to be simply growing apart — splitting into separate, unequal, and frequently hostile cultural and ethnic groupings who live, work, worship, and play in separate enclaves. A poll conducted by DYG, Inc. and sponsored by the Ford Foundation's Campus Diversity Initiative found that a majority of Americans believe that "America is growing apart" (National Poll, 1998). This conversation about hate, and about America's response to its increasing diversity isn't a brand-new conversation. Because of several highly publicized incidents and these new demonstrations of national leadership, however, it does seem to have finally reached a level of national awareness that may ultimately present the possibility of real change and of enabling genuine civic involvement of many more Americans traditionally left out of the nation's public life.

Higher education has a critical role to play in addressing both of these sets of concerns and is increasingly doing so through an emerging set of educational strategies. In fact, higher education may have a more important role to play in these matters than ever before given that a much larger percentage of high school graduates are now attending college and these new students bring to campus a more diverse array of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds than ever before. This reality presents a huge challenge, but also an unprecedented set of opportunities.

In order to respond to these changes and take advantage of these opportunities, AAC&U has joined with many others to sup-

port the development of new educational strategies and diversity courses through a multiproject national initiative called “American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and Liberal Learning” begun in 1993 and involving hundreds of colleges and universities around the nation. From the beginning of this initiative, those who conceived this project believed that for higher education’s diversity agenda to be effective, it had to be embedded in a reexamination and engagement with America’s democratic history, practices, and institutions. This belief, however, and the simple use of the term “democracy” turned out to be a much harder “sell” than the leaders of the project ever anticipated. Given America’s history of denying basic democratic rights to so many of its residents, many of those individuals involved in the diversity movement are skeptical of any calls for a *renewed* commitment to democracy. Many are especially skeptical about calls to a *return* to some better time of civic engagement and national unity. Many people involved in the diversity movement believe that any previous sense of national unity we may have had in America was forged by denying the diversity in our midst and, in fact, enabled the civic involvement of only a small portion of the population.

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Working with colleges and universities as they attempt to teach more accurately about America’s past and create effective learning environments for much more diverse student populations, we are more convinced than ever, however, that the linking of diversity, democracy, and civic engagement is essential. We are also, however, more cognizant now of a series of shifts that need to occur in *how* we teach about democracy *and* diversity and the preconditions that are required before genuine public engagement can occur on a large scale in a country as diverse as ours.

In our college classrooms, we need first to acknowledge both our differences and the failures of American democracy. We need to recognize the contributions that various diverse communities have made in building America’s communities and public institutions (Joseph, 1995). We also need to learn to listen to understand, and to appreciate that diverse voices and experiences are needed to solve America’s complex social problems.

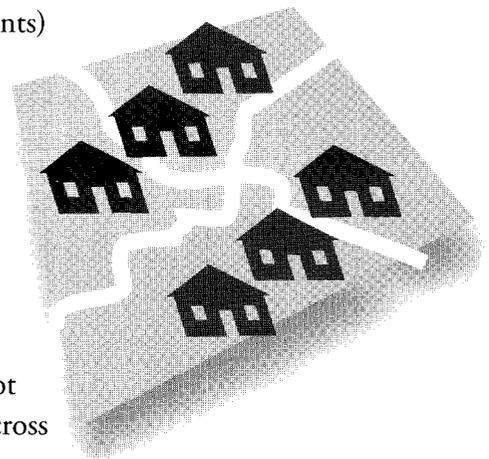
We also need to realize that there is a big difference between simply assembling a diverse group of people and engaging the diversity in our midst in educationally productive ways. The good news is that colleges and universities like those involved in AAC&U’s American Commitments projects have developed a

variety of new educational strategies to engage diversity in just these productive ways.

Many colleges and universities are creating programs that connect students' in-classroom learning about diversity with experiences in solving real-world problems in communities. For instance, in a program at Queens College in New York, students work with faculty members on research projects that make use of the diverse communities surrounding the college. In one such project, eight students examined relations among African-American and Asian-American residents in Brooklyn directly following a boycott of a Korean grocery store by African-American residents that made headlines across the country. Students, many of whom were Asian-American or African-American and from the local community, conducted interviews and found that there was less animosity between the two groups than many assumed after learning about the boycott from the media. One African-American student in the project, Sharon Bradley, expressed her surprise "at how many people thought that the boycott incidents were blown out of proportion." Another African-American student, Mica McCarthy, reported talking to more people who felt the boycotts were justified because of a pattern of "lack of respect for black customers." She believes that the project gave all of the students deeper insights into multiple perspectives on racial questions (AAC&U, 1997).

Using another new educational approach, the University of Michigan now offers for-credit courses on "Intergroup Relations, Conflict, and Community" that teach students about how different groups have experienced American democracy now and in the past. The courses also, however, teach specific intergroup dialogue skills. They purposely bring together students from two different groups (e.g., African-American and white students, or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight students) and enable them to work together to address conflicts that may arise among and within these groups. Students learn how to constructively address conflicts that may arise on campus. They explore the possibilities and pre-conditions for building community across racial and ethnic boundaries.

Students in diversity courses are not just learning about oppression, then. Across



the country, students are taking the knowledge and skills they are learning in diversity courses and are using them to solve real-life problems that inevitably arise on diverse campuses. Students who have taken a new required course on “Self and Community” at Olivet College in Michigan, for example, report that they now find it easier to discuss issues of racial conflict outside the classroom. Students report that taking the course has encouraged them to reach out and socialize with students who have backgrounds different from their own. Campus leaders at SUNY-Buffalo report that a required course on “American Pluralism and the Search for Equality” has also had an impact beyond the classroom. Students consistently report that the course gives them an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues. In fact, in the midst of a heated campus debate in which race figured prominently, students from this course were the ones who were most informed about the issues and contributed most productively to the debates (Humphreys, 1998).

Many campuses also made use of the opportunity presented by President Clinton’s Initiative on Race. With support from the Ford Foundation, AAC&U supported over 60 colleges and universities in forging alliances with community partners to build trust, conduct candid discussions, and learn from one another about America’s racial legacies. Through these initiatives, thousands of college students were engaged in community dialogue and problem solving grounded in the history of genuine interracial community-building.

Are these new strategies, courses, and programs having an impact? Do they have the potential to encourage a different level of civic engagement for more of today’s college students? Many are skeptical about this outcome. Readers of this journal will, no doubt, be familiar with the well-publicized critiques of the diversity movement in higher education. Critics suggest that teaching about the *failures* of democracy undermines students’ commitment to American democratic institutions. They also argue that the acknowledgment of difference entailed in new programs designed to serve specific new populations of students only serves to divide students rather than bring them together and strengthen a sense of community.

In fact, the evidence is beginning to suggest that the exact opposite is true. Teaching about America’s diversity and the struggles for justice and democratic inclusion that pervade our nation’s

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history can renew students' sense of hope about democratic institutions and their commitment to public involvement. As the examples above suggest, diversity education is bringing students of different backgrounds together. In addition, America's increasingly diverse college campuses are, indeed, providing opportunities for students to interact productively across racial and ethnic lines. A common misconception about campus diversity and diversity programs is that they encourage racial and ethnic self-segregation among students that undermine the educational promise of a genuinely multicultural college community.

Research suggests that just the opposite seems to be true. A number of studies suggest that student self-segregation by race is not as widespread as one might suppose from media coverage of the phenomena. It also suggests that the programs and activities in which students do cluster in separate racial/ethnic groups aren't preventing students from interacting across racial/ethnic lines. In one recent study, Anthony Lising Antonio examined the extent to which students perceived racial balkanization at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and whether their perceptions reflected the reality of actual close friendship patterns at the institution. He found that students at UCLA do, indeed, *view* their campus as racially balkanized. More than 90 percent of students in his surveys agreed that students predominantly cluster by race and ethnicity on campus. When Antonio calculated the actual racial/ethnic diversity or homogeneity of close friendship groups, however, a very different picture emerged. Only 17 percent of UCLA students, or about one in six, reported having friendship groups that were racially and ethnically homogenous and the most common friendship group on campus (46 percent) was, in fact, racially and ethnically mixed with no racial or ethnic group constituting a majority (Antonio, 1999).

Another earlier study also found that especially students of color report *frequent* interaction across race and ethnicity in informal situations on college campuses. This study of 390 institutions also found that ethnic-specific activities didn't seem to impede intergroup contact for the students who participated in them.



Programs like racial/ethnic theme houses and study groups seemed to help students involved in them persist and succeed in college and increased their involvement overall with other areas of college life in which they interacted frequently across racial/ethnic lines (Hurtado, et. al 1994).

Patricia Gurin has also just completed a study of diversity and learning outcomes at the University of Michigan. She found that “a racially and ethnically diverse university student body has far-ranging and significant benefits for all students, nonminorities and minorities alike.” She argues, in fact, that “patterns of racial segregation and separation historically rooted in our national life can be broken by diversity experiences in higher education.” Her research demonstrates that campus diversity is having an impact far beyond the college years. For instance, Gurin found that “diversity experiences during college had impressive effects on the extent to which graduates ... were living racially and ethnically integrated lives in the postcollege world. Students with the most diversity experiences during college had the most cross-racial interactions five years after leaving college” (Gurin, 1999).

The health of America’s civic life and the very possibility of greater civic engagement among more Americans depends on bringing different groups of Americans together, encouraging greater respect for the variety of communities that make up the nation, and learning the skills we all need to live productively with difference. The various strategies being developed by practitioners involved in the campus diversity movement are proving to be highly effective in preparing students for an informed civic engagement in today’s diverse American communities.

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AN INVITATION

By David Mathews

Moving down the runway at an ever-increasing speed, my Delta flight to Los Angeles lifted off the surface and began a slow climb to its cruising altitude. While this was happening, I was reading the articles for this *Higher Education Exchange*. The takeoff struck me as an apt analogy for what this issue is attempting. As Debra Humphreys has noted, the *Exchange* has been moving down the same “runway” since its inception. The central theme has been described in a number of ways: the relation of the academy and public life, the importance of democratic civil society, scholarship as public work, higher education and community-building, and democracy and deliberation.

Beginning with this issue, the *Exchange* is committing itself to a systematic intellectual project — a “lift-off” if you will — powered by three distinct but related lines of inquiry. Taken together, they will explore the different meanings of democratic politics that are being discussed today. None is right or wrong, as Harry Boyte observes, yet they make very different assumptions about what self-government means and requires.

This publication is one part of a research project that includes an annual seminar (now held in Washington, D. C.) on the relationship of the academy and the public. It provides another opportunity for discussing the questions the *Exchange* will be addressing over the next two years. I mention this because these questions are very much open to you, the reader, and what we hope will be an increasing number of people who find them important.

One question that will be the subject of a series of articles is the nature of the claims that democracy makes on higher education, which will be addressed by dealing with the claims themselves and by looking at the way institutional higher education views democracy. The concept that higher education has of “the public,” especially the understanding of the public implied in the way colleges and universities behave toward the citizenry, should be very revealing. Looking at how the citizens who serve as trustees think