

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

of their fellow citizens should also be interesting. Still another approach to this question will be to ask how higher education sees “the public and its problems” (to borrow a title). There will be other stories like the one Douglas Challenger wrote on how institutions are providing space on their campus for what can be described as “public-making” activities. Students like D. Conor Seyle will report on the impact that such efforts can have, not just on the citizenry at large, but on a student body’s perception of its own citizenship.

Institutional higher education is directed by presidents, provosts, deans, and trustees. But higher education is far more than institutions, as Jay Rosen points out it is a collection of academic disciplines and professional studies. It is the faculty. And what is happening to that faculty is very important, as Maria Farland explains in her article. So future issues of the *Exchange* will look into the way faculty members understand their relationship to the public or public life, and more personally, the way they see themselves as public beings — a topic already introduced in Mary Stanley’s article. Other pieces will play out the implications these perspectives have for the way academics understand scholarship. Inevitably, the *Exchange* will be drawn into the question of what it means to know and where, as a bearer of knowledge, the scholar “stands” in public life. R. Claire Snyder and David Brown have already raised these issues in their articles.

Higher education also has a number of other constituencies such as professional groups like lawyers, physicians, farmers, business executives, and journalists or, in some cases, whole communities. Ask colleges and universities what they offer these groups and you will hear a familiar mantra: “teaching, research, and service,” with an emphasis on service. The *Exchange* will raise what may seem an odd question: “What is political about this supposedly apolitical assistance?” This question cuts in several ways. When a college or university enters a community to bring technical advice or to foster economic development or school improvement or to work for any other purpose, it structures a relationship with the community, that reflects unstated assumptions about what citizens can or can’t do. In addition, the assistance offered carries with it a predetermined definition of the problem, which is usually a technical definition. That may obscure the moral nature of the difficulty (“What should we do about . . .”) as well as the necessity of making public choices on

issues that, by their very nature, require judgments on which a number of options are most consistent with what people hold dear. Even the technical information given to professionals carries with it unstated assumptions about how that profession should relate to the public. The *Exchange* will provide an opportunity for asking whether the politics that academic institutions bring with them in their relation to constituents is consistent with democratic politics.

Consider this an invitation to contribute to the ongoing exploration of the meaning of democratic politics and the role of higher education. I invite you to write the editors of this publication; without you, it will be a very slow lift-off.

CONTRIBUTORS

David Brown is coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* and a professor of professional practice at the New School's Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy.

Harry C. Boyte is the founder and codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. He is also a senior fellow at the Humphrey Institute. His recent published works include *Creating the Commonwealth* with Nancy Kari, Nan Skelton, and Jim Lewis. He was national coordinator of the New Citizenship, a coalition designed to strengthen citizenship.

Douglas Challenger is associate professor of sociology and director of the New Hampshire Center for Civic Life and the Diversity and Community Project at Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, New Hampshire. As a Senior Fulbright Scholar, he studied citizenship in Slovenia. He has written on social and political theory, civic education, and citizenship, and has published a book entitled *Durkheim Through the Lens of Aristotle: Durkheimian, Postmodernist, and Communitarian Responses to the Enlightenment* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

Maria Farland is currently a member of the Society of Fellows at Columbia University. In the fall of 2000, she will join the faculty of Fordham University, where she will teach English and American Studies. She is currently completing a book manuscript on gender and professionalism and has published numerous articles on American literature and culture.

Debra Humphreys is the director of programs in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. She is the executive editor of the newsletter, *On Campus with Women* and the editor of *Diversity Digest*. She has also directed numerous national initiatives on issues of diversity in higher education including "Racial Legacies and Learning: An American Dialogue" and "Diversity Works." Her most recent publication is "General Education and American Commitments: A National Report on Diversity Courses and Requirements."

David Mathews, who is president of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of health, education, and welfare in the Ford administration, and before that, president of The University of Alabama. He has written extensively on such subjects as education, political theory, southern history, public policy, and international problem solving. His most recent books are *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* and a revised edition of *Politics for People*.

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Daniel Seyle, who goes by Conor, is a graduating psychology major at Texas A&M University who has worked with the National Issues Forums at that school since the beginning of its developing program. His plans for the rapidly looming postgraduation life change weekly, but will involve graduate study in the field of social cognition.

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Mary Stanley taught at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs for many years. Currently she is an independent scholar, writer, and researcher. She has published in the areas of citizenship, service learning, and the role of women in public life. Mary hosts a public affairs radio program in Syracuse, New York, "The Good Society Forum" and directs a research project on youth culture.

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