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## Why It Is Imperative To Strengthen American Democracy Through Study, Dialogue and Change In Higher Education

Nancy L. Thomas (ed.)

*The Democracy Imperative*, University of New Hampshire, nancy.thomas@tufts.edu

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# Why It Is Imperative To Strengthen American Democracy Through Study, Dialogue and Change In Higher Education

## **Abstract**

In July 2007, about 40 people – faculty from across disciplines, campus leaders, and civic leaders – gathered for several days at the University of New Hampshire to discuss the role of higher education in American democracy. While we gathered out of concern for the way our democracy seemed to be working, we were also encouraged by promising experiments in democratic dialogue, deliberative politics, and public problem solving, efforts that seem strategic and designed with a strong democracy in mind. Many of the academics in the group were already experimenting with approaches to civic learning, political engagement, democratic dialogue, and programs in leadership or conflict resolution, but in many cases, they didn't know about each other or even the networks of individuals doing similar work. We agreed to form The Democracy Imperative, a network of educators and who would work together to strengthen democracy in and through higher education.

One of our first priorities was to publish a paper framing the nature of the problem and our vision for higher education as a vibrant partner in democratic renewal work. We published that paper in late 2007, but this is a fast-moving field. This 2010 version is an updated version of the Democracy Imperative's original framing paper.

## **Keywords**

higher education, teaching and learning, deliberative democracy

***Why it is imperative to strengthen American democracy through study, dialogue, and change in higher education<sup>1</sup>***

Americans seem confused about what democracy is and complacent about their personal responsibilities in a democracy. Some mistakenly describe democracy as a system of governance and majority rule. When majorities rule, they tend to rule on behalf of those who gave them power rather than for the common good. 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.

At the Democracy Imperative (TDI), we view democracy as more than a form of government. It is a culture, a way that people interact and work together to improve society according to a particular set of principles and practices. A strong democracy has an educated and informed citizenry, inclusive social and political systems, and vigorous participation of 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 are responsive to ideas generated through public deliberation. People see their will reflected in policy solutions.<sup>2</sup> Everyday citizens work together to build their communities to achieve shared ideals. They live by and protect democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and equity. Some call this *deliberative democracy*.

Modern deliberative democratic initiatives include study circles, intergroup dialogues, issue forums, public conversations, e-democracy, and

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this paper (2007), as well as this revised version (2009), was drafted by Nancy Thomas and collaboratively edited by the Democracy Imperative board: Derek Barker (Kettering Foundation), Shelby Brown (Capital Community College system of Connecticut), Ande Diaz (Roger Williams University), Michele Holt-Shannon (University of New Hampshire), Caryn McTighe Musil (Association of American Colleges and Universities), Matt Leighninger (Deliberative Democracy Consortium), Peter Levine (CIRCLE, Tufts University), Bruce Mallory (University of New Hampshire), John Saltmarsh (New England Resource Center for Higher Education), David Schoem (University of Michigan), Patrick Scully (Everyday Democracy), and Robert Stains (Public Conversations Project). Martin Carcasson (Colorado State University) and John Gastil (University of Washington) also contributed editorial suggestions to this draft.

<sup>2</sup> In 1984, Benjamin Barber published *Strong Democracy*, an ideal he describes as “unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry... [One in which] institutions involve individuals at neighborhood and national levels in common talk, common decision-making and political judgment, and common action” (261). Many of the principles and practices described in this paper have their roots in Barber’s work.

more.<sup>3</sup> This movement toward greater deliberation reflects a convergence of two forces in our aspirational democracy – cyclical efforts to engage citizens in public life and ongoing efforts to promote equity and justice. Together, these projects aim to make our social and political systems inclusive, fair, accessible, and effective, and we believe they can be powerful antidotes to exclusion, inequality, disengagement, polarization, and incivility.

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

### **Where are American Colleges and Universities?**

American higher education is a complex industry that serves many purposes. Colleges and universities are the traditional venues for liberal learning and critical intellectual exploration. They support cutting-edge scientific research and development. They are the premier think tanks for social science and commentary on the state of American and global society. Higher education is critical to national economic growth as well as individual career development and upward mobility.

American colleges and universities have always asserted that they prepare students for a life of responsible citizenship. Early colleges, such as William and Mary and Harvard College, trained civic leaders for a Christian society. As the image of the ideal society evolved – and Americans came to value more secular and, by some measures, egalitarian principles – universities mirrored those changes and embraced a mission of educating students for civic participation in a democracy. The establishment of secular public and private institutions, the public land-grants, women’s colleges, and historically black colleges reflects the ideals and needs of an emerging 19<sup>th</sup> Century democracy. Higher education experienced another wave of egalitarian expansion after World War II, with the GI Bill, the creation of community colleges, and admissions policies stemming from the civil rights movements.

The last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an era of rapid demographic, governance, economic, and technological change in the US. With those changes came challenges for American democracy. By the 1990s, researchers and civic organizations started sounding the alarms over the quality of the nation’s civic

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<sup>3</sup> Three excellent books that survey these activities are *The Next Form of Democracy* (Leighninger, 2006), *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (Gastil and Levine, eds., 2005), and *Intergroup Dialogue* (Schoem and Hurtado, 2000).

health (c.f., Putnam, 2000). We had become *a nation of spectators*. Our social capital, measured by indicators such as attendance at meetings, membership in groups, volunteerism, public service, television viewing rates, trust in government, had steadily declined for thirty years. Higher education leaders and scholars publicly challenged colleges and universities to do more to promote civic engagement (c.f. Ehrlich, 2000).

To their credit, colleges and universities responded. They updated mission statements to reflect a civic commitment. They endorsed the *Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Mission of Higher Education*, and established offices of Campus Compact, volunteerism, service learning, and community-university partnerships. They supported “alternative Spring breaks,” first-year experiences, capstones, sustained dialogue programs, community-based research, community problems solving through cooperative extension and adult education, and public access to facilities. Some revised their faculty reward system and the very concept of scholarship, traditionally viewed as the scientific discovery of new knowledge, to include outreach or engaged scholarship. They established faculty development programs to promote more interactive pedagogies. In 2005, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching added to its classification system a voluntary Community Engagement Classification. Institutions that can demonstrate a deep commitment to community engagement – manifested by curricular engagement and/or outreach and partnerships – can apply for official recognition beyond the traditional classification system.

The work continues to evolve, as does the language we use to describe it. The term *civic engagement* is now used to describe a broad range of public and private activities: voting, attending a political rally, writing an op-ed piece, charitable giving, serving as a foster parent, attending PTO meetings, community service and volunteerism, community organizing, choosing a public service career, and much more. *Institutional engagement* ranges from supporting student service and service learning to community based research that leads to real problem solving to providing space on campus for public deliberation. Practitioners often use the term *public engagement* or *participation*, referring broadly to citizen engagement in the political process. One organization, the International Association for Public Participation, describes public participation as: (1) ways to share information (listservs, bill stuffing, conferences, issue briefs), (2) techniques for soliciting and compiling feedback (polls, surveys), and (3) techniques to bring people together (dialogue and deliberation, public meetings) (2006).

Because these activities are so diffuse, TDI distinguishes between *civic learning/education and engagement* and *democratic learning/education and engagement*. At TDI, we use *democratic* to describe experiences that teach the knowledge, principles, and practices valuable to a democracy as both a form of

government and a culture. We understand, that *civic* is the more common descriptor, and we opt not to use it because it includes activities that, while extremely valuable, are often apolitical or separate from learning for and about democratic governance and culture (e.g., volunteerism, service learning).

We also have more clarity on the measurable skills and learning outcomes we might expect from democratic learning experiences. Opinions on knowledge and skills for engagement vary (see CIRCLE Fact Sheet, 2010; Colby and Sullivan, 2009; AAC&U LEAP Report, 2007; Kirlin, 2003). For TDI's purposes, we've synthesized these lists. We believe that quality democratic engagement calls for:

- Communication skills (written, oral, and intergroup and intercultural)
- Collaborative decision making and public reasoning skills (critical thinking and reflection, conflict management, team work, active listening)
- Competent understanding and critical analysis of knowledge and information (research skills, evaluating the quality of arguments)
- Civic literacy (the history of American democracy, understanding of core Constitutional ideals, government structures and operations)
- Personal integrity and a sense of public purpose

Clearly, every college president and board is “for” engagement and learning for democracy, but there are many reasons to question the effectiveness of higher education's civic movement. Civic educators express concern that their programs are marginalized and disconnected from their institution's core mission and from what students claim to want from postsecondary education. All too often, civic programs are not integrated into the primary 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.

It is not clear that existing programs affect more than a relatively small number of students. Moreover, what campuses say they are doing and what students say they are experiencing are inconsistent. Of the colleges and universities that participated in a recent study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, about 80 percent *say* that they are educating for social responsibility, and that learning outcomes in civic engagement, ethical reasoning, intercultural skills, information literacy, oral communication, and diversity are essential to all students. Yet fewer than half of students say that these skills were emphasized during their first year of college, and the number drops to about one-third by senior year (AACU, 2008). These results suggest that campuses aren't

doing what they say they are doing, at least in ways that affect a majority of students (not to mention those who don't graduate).

Although more young people are attending college than their counterparts did, say, fifty years ago, researchers report that political knowledge and engagement have actually decreased (Colby, 2008, p. 4). And while, as a result of their service learning experiences, students may see more of a need to volunteer or have a greater sense of empathy toward others, they do not develop an understanding of or need to address structural or systemic problems in American society. Nor are they necessarily learning the skills they need to participate in a democracy.

There has also been a weak, and arguably competitive, relationship between the diversity and civic movements in higher education. The diversity movement, consisting of efforts to increase access, improve campus climate, and offer interdisciplinary cultural studies, is rarely connected to the offices responsible for civic learning and engagement. The work of diversity offices is almost entirely campus-based. The civic engagement movement in higher education has largely ignored the fact that engagement requires more egalitarian conditions than currently exist in society. It's easy to provide students with learning experiences that expose them to issues yet avoid (other than through detached theoretical study) the underlying social and political conditions, particularly historical and structural racism, that make the problems so entrenched. 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, fiercely individualistic faculty cultures, 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.

This isn't to say that there are not models of democratic learning and engagement. Some campuses offer programs in intergroup dialogue modeled after the Program on Intergroup Relations, initiated at the University of Michigan in 1988. Intergroup dialogue is a face-to-face, interactive, and facilitated learning experience that brings students together over a sustained period of time to explore their perspectives on issues, explore the nature and consequences of power and privilege dynamics, and finds ways to work together. Forty-three campuses have established centers for public deliberation or civic life as part of the National Issues Forum Institute. They work with the Kettering Foundation to study "what it

takes to make democracy work as it should.” The Ford Foundation’s Difficult Dialogues grant competition to promote academic freedom and religious, cultural, and political pluralism on U.S. campuses had attracted over 700 proposals for 25 awards. Programs originally designed for individual skill development – conflict resolution and leadership programs, for example – have added a public problem solving dimension to the curriculum.

Yet despite these efforts, national patterns of socio-economic inequality, polarization based on social identity and ideology, acts of intolerance and incivility, social and political disengagement, and environmental deterioration persist, even as the national debt skyrockets.

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 democratic ideals and practices 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 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, seeing it more as a form of government and less of a set of principles and practices in public life. This needs to change. Students should study, critique, and

understand *why* freedom, justice, and equity are essential to a strong and effective democracy, and the tensions between them. 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.

Understanding the U.S. Constitution and democratic ideals are critical, but they need to be examined not just as theoretical values but as interests that in sometimes conflict. To some, freedom means freedom from government regulation and restrictions, particularly involving expression, the press, and religious practice. To others, freedom is an egalitarian concept. No one is free if they lack equal access to foundational social, economic, and political systems, and sometimes those conditions won't exist without government intervention. Understanding and balancing these tensions goes beyond research and knowledge acquisition, higher education's current primary mission. They involve cultivating in students – and those who teach – wisdom and judgment.

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, communication, 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, and between knowledge and wisdom? How do groups best address tensions between positive but opposing values? 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, but 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.

For example, colleges and universities are ideal venues to explore and learn approaches to dialogue. Dialogue is used to: change individual behavior and attitudes, particularly to increase intercultural understanding and tolerance; confront and address historic and contemporary social injustice; increase civility and respect; build community and networks; change institutions such as governments and workplaces; and 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 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 understand and 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. In a diverse democracy, public problems inherently involve competing values that call for tough choices and tradeoffs that necessitate understanding and productive engagement across perspectives.

Colleges and universities need to make inclusive dialogue, public reasoning, conflict transformation, judgment, 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. Every venue on campus can be a practice ground for democracy.

### *Modeling Democracy*

*What does it mean to be committed to shared governance in higher education? Who needs to have a seat at the table for truly inclusive decision-making processes on campus? How do colleges and universities “be the change” they seek in the world?*

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. Some include students on committees and governing boards. 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—by teaching democratic principles and practices.

One place to start is with some campus conversations on higher education’s role in a deliberative democracy. Attendees at the original Democracy Imperative meeting developed and endorsed a Statement of Principles and Practices (see Appendix). It, with this paper, can serve as the foundation for those dialogues.

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## Appendix

### The Democracy Imperative's Statement of Principles and Practices

#### **We endorse the following statement of principles and practices:**

*We believe* that all Americans should know and understand the history and current state of American freedom, justice, and equity and *why* these principles are critical to a strong and effective democracy.

*We believe* that the arts of democracy – inclusive dialogue, thoughtful and informed public reasoning, conflict transformation, and social policymaking and action – are essential characteristics of quality education and a strong and effective democracy.

*We believe* that diversity in social identity, values, and ideology is a necessary condition for effective democratic processes. We work for equity in and access to social and political systems on behalf of *all* stakeholders, regardless of their position or authority.

*We acknowledge* that structural inequalities exist both within higher education and society at large and that these inequalities are detrimental to democracy and freedom. Further, when such inequalities grow large enough, they undercut and threaten the fragile foundation of our democracy. Therefore, *we challenge* colleges and universities to question their own policies that may reinforce inequalities of power, access, and opportunity. *We implore* educational institutions to teach all students how to rigorously analyze and effectively address injustices. *We welcome* diverse ideological perspectives on how to define and bring about a more just society.

*We believe* that dissent and conflict are transformative agents. We encourage the view that conflict presents an opportunity for reflection, study, growth, and change. Commensurately, we reject discrimination, coercion, intimidation, or other behaviors that restrict the free exchange of ideas and civil discourse.

*We challenge* individuals to engage in public life responsibly – to study ethical, social, and political issues, to seek to understand multiple viewpoints, to balance competing values and perspectives, to communicate responsively, and to engage in an open process of informed public reasoning. *We challenge* the academy to increase institutional commitment to and education for these democratic principles and practices.

*We challenge* colleges and universities to integrate across the curriculum opportunities for students to “practice” the arts of democracy. Classrooms, co-curricular programs, and residential learning communities provide ideal venues for teaching students to organize and facilitate dialogues and to work collaboratively to solve problems and collectively implement solutions.

*We urge* institutions that may be risk averse, that shy away from controversial events and topics, to treat provocative social, ethical, and political issues as interdisciplinary teaching and learning opportunities.

*We challenge* institutional leaders and decision-makers to model the arts of democracy by addressing institutional issues and making change through a transparent process – a process that actively seeks diverse perspectives, encourages the weighing of choices, and conceptualizes reform as an ongoing process rather than a set outcome. The way colleges and universities act must reflect more closely the ideals of engaged and informed citizenry that they seek to instill in students. We challenge colleges and universities to examine, critique, and discuss how decisions are made, who decides, and how power and authority are exercised toward the ideal of shared governance.

*We remind* colleges and universities of their long-standing contributions to society through public scholarship and social analysis. Faculty members should be recognized and rewarded for research and teaching that has public relevance. We challenge colleges and universities to adopt promotion and tenure standards that value interdisciplinary and problem-based learning and community-based scholarship. We urge scholars to publish in venues that are open sources and to write in ways that are broadly accessible.

*We challenge* colleges and universities to increase their role as valuable institutional assets in communities. They should garner and extend institutional resources to help communities address social challenges that call for interdisciplinary analysis and solutions. They should serve as equal partners and collaborators and model the arts of democracy as a foundation for any community-university partnerships.

*We believe it is imperative that* colleges and universities act immediately to play a vital role in promoting these democratic principles and practices.

*We accept* the responsibility of modeling in our own work and classrooms the democratic principles and practices outlined in this statement.

*We dedicate* ourselves to serving as a resource, advocate, and convener for colleges and universities seeking support for these efforts.

This *Statement of Principles and Practices* is available at  
<http://www.unh.edu/democracy/>.