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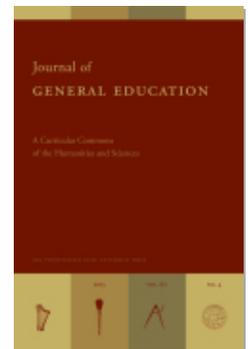

Beyond the "Ivory Tower": Restoring the Balance of Private and Public Purposes of General Education

Nancy Cantor, Peter Englot

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BEYOND THE "IVORY TOWER"

Restoring the Balance of Private and Public Purposes of General Education

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ABSTRACT

We in higher education have allowed the balance of the private and public purposes of liberal education to become skewed in our angst over fully embracing a central role in restoring prosperity and preparing our increasingly diverse population for the evolving responsibility of mending our fraying democracy. As we consider how best to reshape general education for our time and for the future, we would do well to recall our public purpose and to rethink where and how that education occurs.

Liberal education in America has always been characterized by the intertwining of private and public purposes, reflecting our nation's underpinnings. The private purpose can be construed as propelling individuals toward autonomy by cultivating within them both specialized knowledge and critical thinking; the public, as propelling our society toward "a more perfect union" by cultivating across our populace the capacities to advance prosperity and democracy. This balanced conception has become distorted as we face a deeply polarized and dysfunctional sociopolitical landscape and the many challenges—social, economic, environmental, educational—facing our urban and rural communities, not to mention the threats (and opportunities) of a "flat world." We have allowed our national discussion of higher education's aims to devolve into a debate focused on private purposes (and a particularly narrow, consumerist interpretation of

them at that), as if the idea of liberal education could remain coherent as its dual purposes are teased apart. We have lost sight of the central and increasingly important role that liberal education plays in preparing new generations of leaders, professionals, and citizens to steer our democratic institutions and our communities. Accordingly, we need to reconsider every dimension of how best to prepare the diverse next generation to make a difference, to move our communities, our nation, and our world in more just, equitable, and sustainable directions.

A good place to start is where and how liberal education takes place. Is the distance of an academic cloister the best place to prepare the diverse next generation for a world brimming with complex and deeply integrated challenges? If we want our students to be adept at engaging the problems of the world, wouldn't it be wiser to find ways to get them more immediately (even prematurely) into the fray? What if we were able to do this while ensuring that they would be guided by scholars and professionals also working to affect change, immersed in what would effectively be a proving ground for future citizens and professionals in this contested and chaotic world? And if we managed to get out of the cloister, more directly engaging the world as a public good, wouldn't we have a greater chance of discovering that next generation of talent, especially those who might not always see our institutions as likely places in which to be educated?

One clear way to facilitate such engaged education is for us to get out of the ivory tower and create place-based environments where our students can experience problem solving among the full "community of experts"—today's leaders, professionals, and citizens—whose knowledge undeniably has purchase in actually getting things done in the world. In these kinds of environments, our students—and we—are most likely to experience the productive combination of inspiration and humility needed for our work to make a difference, arising from an education that develops critical awareness in three broad areas. One is an appreciation for the importance of cultivating expansive definitions of talent, knowledge, and expertise and promoting a growth mind-set that focuses not on where one starts but, rather, on where one can potentially finish. Such an inclusive orientation will serve us well in a world that is both all too prone to leave talent behind and yet deeply in need of the innovation that comes from a diverse group of problem solvers.

Another related outcome of this kind of place-based, engaged education and scholarship is an appreciation for the complexity of today's most pressing challenges, the variety of modes of tackling them, and the diversity of excellence, irrespective of disciplinary boundaries, needed around the table to address them, all of which makes real for our students—and us—the value of group work while exposing the hollow foundations of what Harry Boyte (2009) has

characterized as the "cult of the expert." Third, as we become steeped in the value of working on complex challenges, from K–12 education, to environmental degradation, to intercultural conflict, in these diverse communities of experts—filled with citizens, professionals, and academicians alike—we come to much more authentically and organically understand the hard work it takes to navigate across difference (defined on many dimensions). We develop a deeper appreciation for the interdependence of the world, whether that world is right here in our own backyard or halfway across the globe; the problems resonate, even as the solutions require much more nuanced communication skills than we might think in our world of facile connectivity.

Not only is this kind of education (embedded within a context of collaborative, publicly engaged scholarship and problem solving) effective in light of the "perfect storm" of demographic, cultural, and scientific/technical challenges we face, but it is profoundly democratic. As John Dewey wrote, democracy is "more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience" (1916/1966, p. 87). He emphasized both the essential stakeholder rights of a democracy and the essential flexibility of democratic institutions to encourage communal responsibility. Such a society "makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms" and "secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through the interaction of different forms of associated life" (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 99). In other words, democracy requires mutual support to ensure a productive and peaceful society. Engaged, place-based education is superb preparation for functioning in a sustainable democracy, demonstrating through experience that an innovative society and an inclusive society go hand in hand by proving that the most effective approach to our world's grand challenges is with "full participation" by our entire talent pool.

It is not a new idea that the best way to tackle complex problems is to bring diverse perspectives to bear on them, but it is easy to forget this because our paradigmatic success stories focus on individuals—historically, of course, these involved men portrayed as heroes who pulled themselves up entirely by their own proverbial bootstraps and, defying the odds, succeeded in solving some great puzzle. Yet, as the late sociologist of knowledge Robert Merton reminded us, the "discoveries" even of giants such as Newton, Faraday, Hooke, and Kelvin—scientists we tend to regard as solitary geniuses—were inseparable from their social contexts, and even Sir Francis Bacon saw science as a fundamentally communal endeavor, dependent upon "the accumulating cultural base and the concerted efforts of men of science sharpening their ideas through social interaction" (Merton, 1961, p. 472). Surely, the communal endeavor of science is more complicated today than in Bacon's time. Not only do we have more data to

parse, coming in a less linear progression from more corners of the net, but we also must master the art of groupthink to reap the full benefits of the diversity of talent and perspectives now available for lasting innovation. As Northwestern University economist Benjamin Jones has written, "If one is to stand on the shoulders of giants, one must first climb up their backs, and the greater the body of knowledge, the harder this climb becomes" (2009, p. 284).

However, scholarship and education that are broadly inclusive, facilitating connections that cross boundaries between disciplines as well as between the academy and the world, including the many groups within a place that feel some ownership of its fate, make discovery less a matter of climbing up others' backs and more of something like a collective barn raising. This mode of discovery harkens back, appropriately, to the vision of the Morrill Acts, which were designed to foster engagement between the academy, on one hand, and nineteenth-century agrarian society and industrial interests, on the other. The barn raising metaphor rings true across fields: it is evident in an extensive body of engaged scholarship across the arts, humanities, and cultural disciplines, described by Julie Ellison and Tim Eatman (Eatman & Ellison, 2008), as well as in the emergence of research centers that catalyze transdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration to break down barriers within and between the physical sciences/engineering and life sciences/medicine (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013).[1]

We need not look far to find the places where today's barns need to be raised and the people with whom we need to forge relationships to get the job done. There can be great value in getting out of the comfort zone of our broader culture to try to understand and work intensively on problems in far corners of the world. But we have glamorized the notion of traveling to the ends of the earth to take on global challenges when we need only peer over our campus walls, through our gates, and down the hills upon which many of us sit (as Syracuse University [SU] does) to recognize that lives and livelihoods are at stake right on our doorsteps. Colleges and universities are place-based institutions, yet we have allowed our centuries-long legacy of cloistering—conceiving our campuses as places apart from the world both metaphorically and physically—to cloud our vision. For too long, we have forgone opportunities to take on pressing global challenges—from environmental sustainability and justice, to dysfunctional urban education, to tapping entrepreneurial talent among long-marginalized groups—that are manifest right in front of us. To be sure, engaging locally can be tricky. There are histories and often entangled relationships among individuals and institutions through and around which we need to navigate, but is that really so different from trying to build trust among partners in research and teaching anywhere in the world or, for that matter, among colleagues across departmental boundaries on our campuses?

Our experience working in close collaboration with many others over the past decade in a Syracuse neighborhood tells us that it is not. Syracuse's Near Westside was a thriving district of manufacturing, railway yards, and housing hit hard during the city's long industrial decline after World War II (Marc, 2011). Today, the neighborhood includes the ninth-poorest census tract in the nation. Half of its 3,300 residents live below the poverty level, 44 percent are African American, 23 percent Latino, 40 percent are unemployed, and 17 percent consider themselves to have one or more disabilities. Home ownership has shrunk to 15 percent. All of the environmental, educational, and economic challenges that one might expect to find in high-poverty neighborhoods anywhere in the world can be found right here. Seven years ago, a group of residents of this diverse, inner-city community joined with us and with foundations, businesses, not-for-profits, state and city government, and other institutions of higher education to create a nonprofit organization, the Near Westside Initiative (NWSI), to take on the neighborhood's challenges (and opportunities) together.

The area is now known as the SALT District—Syracuse Art, Literacy, and Technology—a moniker harkening back to its roots in the salt industry and foreshadowing what we all hope to be its new prosperous future. From the beginning we all recognized the NWSI's power would come from the diversity of participants and the authenticity of their roots in and commitment to this place. So, this 501(c)(3)'s board includes the much revered Father Jim Mathews of St. Lucy's Church; Mary Alice Smothers, a wise resident grandmother and community leader; Dan Queri, a local developer who also runs the youth basketball team at St. Lucy's; Paul Nojaim, a third-generation neighborhood supermarket owner; and many other neighborhood constituencies. They have joined forces with faculty and students from SU as well as public- and private-sector leaders to form a broad "community of experts" that brings diverse perspectives and knowledge to a range of projects conceived and conducted together.

Architecture faculty and students from UPSTATE: A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate at SU are reclaiming abandoned warehouses, designing affordable and sustainable housing, and bringing cranes to a neighborhood that has not seen any in more than sixty years. Engineers from the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems are prototyping a LEED Neighborhood designation with the U.S. Green Building Council. Designers and their students are engaging neighborhood youth in reimagining a centrally located park, and artists and educators helped reclaim a former drug house across from the park that is now a community center emphasizing the arts while developing a curriculum for both SU and local high school students in literacy through photography. La Casita, a Latino cultural center directed by faculty from our Latino/a studies program draws upon the extraordinary

cultural assets of this community, while cultural historians and ethnographers are exploring public memory with residents and cultural institutions. Geographers are working with local community-based organizations to use geographic information system technology to map hunger, and our community law clinic and sustainability and nutrition experts are teaming up with the NWSI board to plan a resident-owned Green Management Company and a hydroponic greenhouse and food co-op. Although this is very much a locally embedded, place-based initiative, the multicultural and transnational roots of many of the Near Westside citizens, some coming to Syracuse as refugees only recently, create significant local–global connections, as exemplified by a recent Syracuse Stage production of *Voices from the Congo*, created and directed by Ping Chong with participation by Congolese community members and collaboration with SU's public diplomacy program. At the center of the neighborhood—in every way—is the K–8 Blodgett School, part of a precedent-setting urban school reform partnership among Syracuse University, the Say Yes to Education Foundation, and the Syracuse City School District built around comprehensive supports to overcome the "opportunity gap"—academic, health, social, emotional, and legal obstacles that so often act as insurmountable barriers to inner-city youth accessing higher education.

All of these projects—and many more like them—hinge on relationship building among diverse partners, a process that can be loud and messy, but the results of which are environments for research and teaching that inspire, create, and sustain a host of innovative and successful collaborations of "experts" of all descriptions. Their shared framework is one form of what the legal scholar Susan Sturm (2006) has called the "architecture of inclusion" for full participation, and there is plenty of room for all to feel included as we talk, even yell, across difference, making for an extraordinary education for all involved. And for our students, this is decidedly not service or even service-learning; it is collaborative democracy.

As clichéd as it may sound, this is as close to democracy in action as we have ever come in the academy. It has also generated over $70 million of public and private development in the Near Westside (including housing owned by longtime residents to counter gentrification) during hard economic times and spawned a host of creative ventures that are engaging people of all generations, every day. And working locally on global challenges like the ones we are taking on together has another distinct advantage: proximity to the problems and the partners with whom we tackle them increases the likelihood that our collective work and its impact will be sustainable for the long term.

For our colleges and universities to achieve that sustainability, we are going to have to work much harder to bring more of the increasingly diverse

talent pool in our nation's schools in closer proximity to us. The fast-growing metropolitan regions of our country (and the world) are genuinely what we call at Syracuse "geographies of opportunity" if only we can learn to tap them. We were reminded of both the urgency of this task and the inadequacy of our commonplace practices while reading the Web site of one of our favorite organizations, the nationally renowned Posse Foundation—an organization taking the lead in uncovering and supporting the talented students whose leadership and entrepreneurial skills may fall through the cracks of our typical admissions processes. It notes: "The key to a promising future for our nation rests on the ability of strong leaders from diverse backgrounds to develop consensus solutions to complex social problems" (2013). We should not expect, though, that the students who are really good at this kind of public problem solving are going to automatically be in our sights as a result of standard practices. First of all, many of the fastest-growing college-age populations have been disadvantaged from the start of what Sean Reardon has called "the rug rat race" of intense enrichment experiences from early on that ultimately predict educational access in the dog-eat-dog world of selective admissions (2013, p. SR1). Even for those who have not, there are many aspects of stereotype threat that persist in undermining performance for so many students from underrepresented groups (Steele, 2010). We need to move beyond narrow measures of merit if we are to ensure a fair start for all. Sadly, though, most of us are still just learning to train our lenses on parts of the talent spectrum where traditional measures are simply not sensitive enough—for example, taking account of "noncognitive" factors such as those that characterize the "strivers" whose tenacity and agility at navigating the obstacles of starting in wildly underresourced schools and neighborhoods suggest very successful finishes if only they can get to our institutions. Actually, there is a wealth of untapped talent out there by any measure, as the work of Caroline Hoxby and others has demonstrated so vividly (Hoxby & Avery, 2012).

Equally important, when we tap more of the talent in these geographies of opportunity, we also need to work, in the words of intergroup dialogue expert Patricia Gurin, to leverage this diversity on (and off) our campuses. We need to talk and work across differences that, on one hand, can divide us and, on the other hand, can fulfill the potential of creative problem solving if bridged (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Sometimes this can happen as part and parcel of what it takes to problem-solve "on the ground," as we have found in our work in the Near Westside of Syracuse—and this is indeed part of the power of such experiences. At other times, it helps to structure the dialogues in the context of formal course work that, while safely removed from the particular stresses of engagement beyond the campus, never stays fully removed from the realities of life beyond the campus. Most impressive is when students and faculty and

community members can seamlessly move back and forth on a two-way street of intergroup dialogue, bringing the world to campus and the campus to the world for real.

By all accounts, higher education is entering a period of paradigmatic disruption, the prevailing theme of which is the need to significantly broaden college access and affordability, as well as realign higher education's agenda more closely with the public good. The focus of much of our public discussion so far has been on the degree to which information technology holds the key to making higher education rapidly and radically more accessible, affordable, and democratic. There certainly is huge potential to be explored, but for technology to have a truly transformative impact, it must do more than merely make the "sage on the stage" accessible to more people. Rather, we need technology to facilitate collaboration among experts from all manner of backgrounds—academics, professionals, and everyday citizens alike. With large swaths of that diverse community of experts still on the wrong side of the digital divide, and with our nation's perilous and widening divide between haves and have-nots, technology cannot fulfill its promise until we have both the civil and the social infrastructure to bridge these divides. Engagement is more than bits and bytes.

Central to the value of engaged scholarship is that it challenges us as scholars in ways that we could not possibly simulate. Engagement face-to-face with people around us who come from a wide range of backgrounds and have a wide range of expertise is messy because it is real, but there is nothing like a dose of reality to remind us about the purpose of our scholarship. Thought experiments have their place, but we all know that what motivates us as scholars is for our work to make a difference in the world. And what motivates us as teachers is to cultivate that kind of passion in our students—to help them develop the tenacity to go after the really hard questions. Perhaps even more important, we need to cultivate in them the wisdom to recognize that the schema of the solitary genius is a myth and what they really need to get good at is forging relationships with others for a common purpose. That is the only way that we ever make progress in solving the complex problems we face—and increasingly will face in this interconnected world of burgeoning population, relentless urbanization, and ubiquitous communication. It also is the single most important trait for us to develop in our students if democracy is not only to survive but to thrive.

NOTE

1. Syracuse University's Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems is one such center. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has called attention to others at Purdue, Colorado, the University of California at San Francisco, and the University of Washington in a 2013 report (p. 40).

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