

## [STUDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICAL LIFE]

# The Politics of Learning for Democracy

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Colleges and universities are facing a series of teachable moments as awareness grows about a range of social and political failures—among them, wealth inequality, racial injustice, sexual assault on and off campus, and the rapid increase in student debt. Driven by anger and frustration, many students are protesting these failures. At the same time, political polarization is on the rise among policy makers and within communities. Polarization off campus affects interactions among students and between students and faculty, which in turn affect the learning environment more broadly. In addition, many institutions have faced politically motivated external pressures. Seeing these trends, I worry that colleges and universities are unprepared for political turbulence, and that they might quash student energy or forego an opportunity for the academy to revisit and invigorate its role in democracy. Can higher education leverage these challenges to facilitate learning for democracy?

This article places college student political learning and participation in a broader context by focusing on two long-standing struggles in higher education: how the academy achieves its civic mission, and how it protects and *earns* its freedom to achieve that mission. The two issues—academic and expressive freedom and civic learning—are symbiotic. Yet both are inconsistently understood and practiced, making them vulnerable to distortion and dilution. Civic learning, academic freedom, and free speech for *what*? To academics, the importance of freedom is obvious; it is less so to policy makers, many Americans, and some students.

By clarifying and recommitting to its democratic purpose, the academy can articulate an educational rationale for the privilege of expressive and academic freedom while simultaneously advancing civic learning.

## Academic Freedom, Free Expression, and Challenges to Democratic Discourse

To fulfill the research, teaching, and civic missions of our nation's institutions, faculty, institutional leaders, staff, and students must study and work in environments conducive to the robust exchange of ideas. In these environments, controversial issues can be discussed and debated without the threat of unreasonable intrusion or suppression. Faculty are free to select research topics and course content; challenge the views of students, colleagues, institutional leaders, and public officials; and publish provocative analyses designed to change the status quo. Students may express dissenting views, in ways that do not disrupt the educational process, without being censored, in an environment that values active listening. Faculty, institutional leaders, and students are part of a *college*, where they share responsibility and work together for the common purpose of facilitating knowledge, skills, and wisdom. Colleges and universities need intellectual autonomy and a commitment to the principles of shared governance so that they can be independent venues for examining matters of public concern.

Academic freedom originated in Germany in the late nineteenth century to facilitate and protect faculty self-governance. The twentieth-century

American version expanded faculty governance to provide protection for faculty research and teaching (Nelson 2010, 12). In 1915, the founders of the American Association of University Professors issued a Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, which they restated jointly with the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities, or AAC&U) in 1940 (American Association of University Professors 2014); more recently, AAC&U's Board of Directors again addressed this topic with a statement on "Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility" (2006).

Over the years, the academy has faced repeated efforts, often politically motivated, to limit what is taught or studied. The most recent barrage of challenges to academic freedom seems highly charged and partisan. The University of North Carolina's Board of Governors recently voted to close three campus centers on poverty, biodiversity, and civic engagement, and supporters of the centers claimed that the decision was politically motivated (Jaschik 2015). University systems nationally have faced bipartisan budget cuts, with the University of Wisconsin system providing one prominent example (Kelderman 2015). Across the country, faculty members' research, teaching, and public statements have faced government intervention, trustee calls for sanctions, institutional investigations, public protest, targeted scrutiny by self-appointed watch groups, national media storms, and student ire (Thomas 2010). Challenges to the speech of individual academics come from left-leaning and right-leaning students, academics, public entities, and private individuals as well as from a well-organized "conservative rapid-response network" (Solow 2004).

Free expression also faces internal challenges, particularly when what constitutes free speech to one person may be

oppressive speech to another. The higher education media have reported countless cases of hecklers drowning out speakers. At Florida Atlantic University, hecklers targeting a guest speaker were escorted from a university building but allowed to continue their protest outside. The students sued the university, claiming they had been denied their civil right to free expression (Straumsheim 2013). At the University of Minnesota, the administration received a petition saying that a flyer advertising an event on political satire in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris was offensive and violated Muslim students' "deeply held religious affiliations" (Flaherty 2015). First Amendment tensions in public life over conflicting religious and expressive freedoms are growing on college campuses.

Hate speech, microaggressions, and poorly worded but unintentionally discriminatory remarks may work to create toxic and unequal learning environments, arguably violating Civil Rights laws such as Title IX. It is understandable that students who are frustrated about the slow pace of social justice in public life or about unwelcoming campus climates would want to challenge such speech. At the University of Washington, graduate students negotiated a new collective bargaining agreement indicating that "employees' work environments should be 'free from everyday exchanges—including words or actions' that denigrate or exclude them as members of some group or class"—a ban that has prompted concerns over free speech (Schmidt 2015). Actions of this type typically provoke claims that the liberal academy has yielded to political correctness. Some argue that efforts to shield students from microaggressions are "creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse" (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015, 44).

Rhetorically, colleges and universities embrace American pluralism, welcoming new populations of students to their campuses and touting diversity of perspective as both an educational and a leadership asset. But these changes shake traditions and norms and introduce new uncertainties into established teaching and decision-making practices. For example, studies repeatedly show that people who act counter-stereotypically face bias. Women can express anger and men can express sadness; but to avoid being judged as diverging from stereotypes, they must offer explanations for their expressions (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008). There is a need to establish new, more inclusive norms and to talk

resist pressures to inhibit freedom or to weaken civic learning programs.

## Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy

When framed in the mid-1990s in response to declines in public participation and social capital, student civic learning and community engagement initiatives in higher education took what are now familiar and publicly acceptable shapes: community-based learning; service, research, and partnerships focused on local problem solving; study abroad; and programs that encourage personal and social responsibility, ranging from recycling to social entrepreneurship. All good, these kinds of experiences

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through the implications of stereotype bias. Managing controversial issues in the classroom or negotiating consensus in shared decision making requires masterful facilitation skills on the part of faculty and institutional leaders. Both are simply more difficult to do when diverse social identities, ideologies, and lived experiences are considered. What's needed is a dialogue to generate new, shared standards for how members of a campus community study and live together.

These formidable challenges to academic and expressive freedom affect the academy's ability to advance civic learning and engagement. The academy must be able to articulate a rationale behind these privileges—and that rationale should underscore its role in educating for *democracy*. Higher education's goals should be aspirational, not for the democracy we *have* but for the democracy we *need*. With a clearer vision of success, campuses can better

foster in students empathy for others, an understanding of civic life, and a commitment to public service.

Yet after twenty years of investment in postsecondary civic learning, problems in public life remain, and, by many measures, are getting worse. The United States has substantially lower voter turnout than other democracies, around 60 percent for a presidential election (Leighley and Nagler 2014, 187). In 2014, young people (ages eighteen to twenty-four) voted at the lowest rate in forty years (CIRCLE 2015). Political inequality persists. Nearly 80 percent of wealthy Americans vote, compared to barely 50 percent of low-income citizens (Leighley and Nagler 2014, 1). Because elected officials respond more to voters than to nonvoters, those crafting US policies do not equally consider the policy preferences of low-income voters (Leighley and Nagler 2014, 188). American media are collapsing, and all Americans—but particularly those in



poor communities—find it challenging to access unbiased news and information (Napoli et al. 2015). Partisan animosity has increased exponentially over the last twenty years. Today, 92 percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican. These intense partisans believe that the opposing party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being" (Pew Research Center 2014). Even the US Supreme Court justices, who are supposed to be nonpartisan, render opinions along party lines "with greater frequency than at any time in recent history" (Abramowitz and Webster 2015, 1). Polarization is not limited to the political arena. Since the 1980s, Americans have been "sorting" themselves into homogeneous communities to live and work with like-minded people (Bishop 2008). The list continues: money in politics, declining interest in public service careers, and so forth.

The academy did not cause these problems, but it must do more to be part of their solutions. When framed in the context of these evolving and often conflicting societal forces, both on campus and in public life, civic learning becomes more complex, contested, precarious, and unavoidably political.

### Education for the Democracy We Need

I believe the academy can clarify its democratic purpose. First, it should view democracy as more than engagement in government (e.g., voting). Democracy is also a culture, a set of principles and practices that guide American community life. Second, educators should distinguish between problems *in* democracy and problems *of* democracy (Mathews 2009, 101). Colleges and universities offer many optional programs concerning problems *in* democracy—for example, on climate change, poverty,

and public education. In contrast, too few students, including those who study major social issues, graduate with an understanding of the problems of democracy—for example, the influence of money in politics and citizen disengagement in policy making and community building—much less how to resolve them. Finally, the academy should develop a set of goals for teaching the problems of democracy that is clear enough to follow yet complicated enough to capture the messiness of a democratic society.

Last summer, for the annual Frontiers of Democracy conference and a related special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* on "the state of the field," I introduced Democracy by Design, a pragmatic approach to conceptualizing the democracy we need, not the democracy we have. Developed through years of conversation among representatives from civic organizations and academics working to strengthen democracy, Democracy by Design is not a mandate, but a discussion tool for identifying goals for democratic learning.

A healthy democracy depends on an ecosystem with four interconnected components, or foundations: (1) active and deliberative civic participation; (2) commitments to freedom, justice, and equal opportunity; (3) public access to quality education and information; and (4) effective government structures. (For a complete description, see Thomas 2014.) Each foundation consists of subcategories; for example, social networks as integral to civic participation. Democracy by Design suggests that all students should learn the four foundations while also mastering at least one subcategory, preferably through experiences embedded within the major field of study, by graduation.

How might a framework like Democracy by Design help colleges and universities navigate challenges to freedom? It would help establish

clear commitments for colleges and universities regarding outcomes for student learning. Consider the second foundation: freedom, justice, and equal opportunity. This foundation concerns structural approaches to combatting political inequality, protection of civil rights, the assurance of equal economic and political opportunity, the fair distribution of resources, and personal economic security. Equity should be seen as a nonpartisan issue. People may disagree about how to achieve political equality, but there should be no disagreement over its place as a problem of democracy. Students exploring this foundation might study, for example, basic rights under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, how to examine issues through the lens of the least privileged in society, the value of opinions and cultural differences in public forums, and how socialization affects an individual's sense of political efficacy.

Consider the foundation focused on effective governance structures. If colleges and universities accepted teaching governance structures along with equity as core to their civic missions, they would teach not just about voting but about *who* votes. The academy has an opportunity to challenge the dominance of money in politics—a problem of democracy—by encouraging students to talk about key election issues and exercise their right to vote.

Consider the foundation focused on civic participation. Political polarization affects how both the government and civil society function. Colleges and universities can tackle growing partisan divides by teaching students the causes and effects of polarization in the United States or the history of social movements, as well as certain skills: understanding the perspectives of others, exploring the merits of dissenting views, managing conflict, facilitating

compromise, and working together for social change.

Too often, issues judged to be political fall under unspoken (or even officially codified) "neutrality" rules, or are considered best avoided or left to personal conversations, opinion, or partisan rancor. While neutrality might shield students from "indoctrination," it also allows institutions to fall short of realizing their potential and responsibility to educate for democracy. Colleges and universities should not be neutral about strengthening democracy, nor should educators forget that they have the privileges of academic and expressive freedom specifically for this purpose.

### Engaging Students, Strengthening Democracy

How, then, can colleges and universities respond to student political interest? They can do so by using this interest as an opportunity to engage students in dialogue about the problems of democracy and how to solve them. Like Americans more broadly, students are turned off by polarized, moneyed governance at the national level, and frustrated or baffled (depending on their perspective) by inequality and the slow (or stalled) pace of social change. What they do not know is what to do.

Much of this issue of *Diversity & Democracy* derives from research conducted by Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service's Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (described more fully on page 9). In our mixed quantitative and qualitative research, we are learning more about campus practices that encourage political learning and engagement. We have learned in particular that political learning is not a matter of what happens during an election season, or the activities of a particular academic department or civic engagement office. Instead, a strong climate for political learning depends on the overall campus

climate—which is determined by a combination of institutional norms, faculty and staff attitudes and behaviors, and structures and programs that shape student experiences. Many of the authors in this issue of *Diversity & Democracy* represent campuses that not only navigate political turbulence but use it to craft teachable moments by intentionally incorporating controversial political issues across the curriculum and cocurriculum for all students.

American society needs an independent voice, an entity that can examine, critique, and affirm or suggest alternatives to the status quo, no matter the discipline or topic, particularly in relation to the shape of American democracy. That voice can and should be the academy. Higher education should reframe its civic mission as an effort to strengthen democracy, overcoming challenges by affirming the rationale for protecting academic freedom and by developing and defending a rationale for learning for a democratic society. ☐

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