

Promoting Civic Education, Civic Engagement and Civic Responsibility: A Higher Education Imperative

By Robert L. Caret



Robert L. Caret delivered the keynote speech during the American Academic Leadership Institute luncheon at AASCU's 2017 Annual Meeting. This is an abridged version of that speech.

The magnitude of the challenges we face today—across society and in higher education—eclipse any I have encountered in my 23 years leading two campuses and two university systems. Divisions arising from political ideology, race and ethnicity, wealth and poverty, and other areas, have become a focal point of national debate and, increasingly, campus unrest.

The impulse within the student population to get involved and to act is laudable. Unfortunately, lacking other tools, and perhaps out of a sense that only confrontation will succeed, many students resort to hecklers' vetoes, violent protests and other counter-productive approaches.

In part, the inability of our students to engage in a more productive manner is rooted in priorities we have set as a society for our colleges and universities. We have put such a premium on skills, employment and workforce development—the “secular” side of higher education—that our broader mission of providing educated and enlightened citizens—the “spiritual” side of higher education—is in danger of being lost.

We need to reestablish higher education's critical leadership role in promoting civic education, civic engagement and civic responsibility.

Beginning with civic education, I cite the introduction to a new book, *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, in which editor Alison McCartney of Towson University (Md.) lays out some disturbing trends that point to our nation's failing “civic health.” Only about

55 percent of the voting age population in the United States turns out in presidential elections. For mid-term, state and local elections, that number is even worse. And most states no longer include civics, social studies or citizenship in their expected education outcomes. We need a greater emphasis on civic education to ensure an informed, knowledgeable and responsible citizenry that understands the origins, impact, importance—and fragility—of democracy.

From a higher education perspective, impactful civic education means helping students develop a powerful “civic skill set.” They need to become thoughtful consumers of news and information, able to differentiate between fact and opinion, to see relationships and make connections, and to draw conclusions that are based on the data. This is almost a textbook definition of “critical thinking.” In addition, they need learning opportunities that shape their outlook and experiences to position them as informed, engaged members of their communities. And while they need to support freedom of expression

A participant at the 2016 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement meeting in Indianapolis, Ind. examines one of the Democracy Plaza chalk boards.



and tolerance for different thoughts, they must also learn to temper that support with a commitment to a rigorous pursuit of fact and inquiry into truth.

Turning now to civic engagement, this vital companion to civic education turns our needs and aspirations into actions. Civic engagement strengthens connections to one another and inspires a commitment to work to make a difference in the life of our communities—the we versus the me. It is marked by a two-pronged approach, first with the university itself active and engaged, and second with students, faculty and staff experiencing and internalizing public action and engagement.

It is, however, important to differentiate between volunteerism and genuine civic engagement. Civic engagement requires students to come to terms with their individual duty as citizens, to become active participants in democracy itself, to understand the work of citizenship, and to understand that citizenship involves responsibilities as well as rights.

The third leg of the stool supporting democracy is civic responsibility, an idea first recorded by the ancient Romans and embedded in our Constitution, which



America's public universities need a new narrative that focuses on the distinctive purposes and contributions of public universities.

directly acknowledges our obligation to make contributions for the good of the whole society. This imperative “mission” to educate for democracy was recognized from the earliest days of our nation by Thomas Jefferson, who observed that an “educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” I would contend that civic responsibility would essentially become an “automatic outcome” for our students if we embraced enhancing civic education and provided opportunities for civic engagement as a truly institution-wide or system-wide priority.

There is no shortage of ideas as to how civic education, engagement and responsibility could be more firmly established as a central purpose of higher education.

First, we need to integrate civic education into institutional core requirements and concentrations for majors. Salisbury University, for example, one of our University System of Maryland (USM) institutions, has created a professional development sequence of seminars to help faculty integrate civic education outcomes across the curriculum. This approach will empower us to educate the whole student, better preparing him or her for citizenship and leadership.

Next, we must model civic engagement throughout the institution. In my current capacity as USM Chancellor, I worked with the USM Board of Regents to establish a Civic Education Workgroup to make recommendations for systemwide initiatives to help our students graduate as more active and effective citizens. By building successful collaborations between academic affairs and student affairs, we can give the issues of civic education and civic engagement university-wide emphasis, and our institutions can be far more successful in renewing our civic mission.

Finally, we need to fully recognize the indispensable importance of institutional leadership. The steps necessary to reestablish public higher education as a force for

teaching and promoting civic engagement and responsibility—changing policy, changing behavior, changing resource allocation, etc.—require committed leadership and broad institutional buy-in. Presidents, provosts, vice-presidents, department heads, and on down the line must all actively support civic initiatives.

Beyond that, presidential leadership is essential for overcoming potential obstacles to instilling the values of civic education, engagement and responsibility in students. There will likely be resistance to these efforts from faculty out of a desire to avoid difficult conversations. There may well be pressure from constituent groups—elected officials, business leaders, governing boards, etc.—to avoid topics or initiatives deemed to be “political.” It will require determined presidential leadership to fend off these challenges and make civic education and civic engagement institutional priorities.

As Benjamin Franklin was leaving Independence Hall at the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, he was asked if we now have a republic or a monarchy. Franklin replied, “a republic . . . if you can keep it.”

Education, particularly public higher education, is a vital part of—and has a significant responsibility to—the republic. We must make it part of our mission to educate men and women who will keep it. The fact that so many aspects of our civic life have become dysfunctional makes this effort all the more important and imperative. If we are committed, it can be our efforts that help move us from civic dysfunction to civic enlightenment. **P**

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Places of Public Purpose



By **Constantine W. (Deno) Curris**

Though the early 19th century marked the establishment of the nation's first public universities, it is widely recognized that the passage of the Morrill Act establishing our land-grant universities was the impetus for the development of public higher education throughout the states. In signing this legislation, enacted in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln described the authorized land-grant institutions, not as "public universities" but rather as "the public's universities."

The Morrill Act delineated its purposes "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, including military tactics, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes." In accepting these grants of land to finance public universities, virtually every state elaborated on those purposes with words such as "providing education for the working classes" and "promoting scientific agriculture." The common ingredient in the establishment of these institutions was that they were to serve societal needs. They were to be places of public purpose.

The normal school movement, which sprung forth a few years later, and which led to the establishment of a far greater number of institutions than the Morrill Act authorized, likewise, was based on fulfilling public needs; namely, the provision of sufficient numbers of capable teachers for each state's elementary and secondary schools. This dearth of

teachers for the public schools was a function not only of depleted ranks due to Civil War casualties, but also resulted from the nation's demographic and geographic growth.

In subsequent years, Congressional action extended land-grant legislation to serve the needs of the nation's African-American populations, and expanded the scope of the Morrill Act to include federal funding to support research activities in support of agriculture and the mechanical arts, as well as establishing outreach or extension programs to ensure that citizens in all parts of the country benefitted from "the public's universities." The 20th century ushered in the development of community colleges and urban universities, as well as the transformation of normal schools into comprehensive universities, often serving the needs of the regions in which they were located. These developments furthered the concept that these public universities were to be places of public purpose, a mission that distinguished them from their private or independent counterparts.

Over the past few decades the commitment to public purpose, the bedrock of public institutions, has eroded. As less emphasis has been placed on its historic mission, public universities have placed greater focus on the education of individual students pointing to wage gains for college graduates in comparison to students with only a high school education. The message to the public emanating from our campuses has been the articulation of the benefits to the individual, not the benefits to society. As the proportion of non-resident students has risen on many campuses, particularly the larger publics, the implicit value of the institution to the citizens of its state is further clouded. While this new narrative of the public university's value to the individual is both true and noble, we must recognize that we are coming close to replicating the long-standing mission of most private or independent institutions and blurring the distinction between publics and privates. As a result, a new conversation has emerged in several states as to the amount of subsidy states should provide to its public institutions. That conversation tends to benefit private institutions, as they point to higher graduation rates, more efficient operations, and the greater value

Participants at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting.



the state receives from the modest amounts accorded to students attending private institutions as opposed to the considerably larger per student subsidies appropriated to its public institutions. In short, we are losing the battle for public and legislative support, in good part because of messages we have made to emphasize our contributions to private gain rather than to the public good.

America's public universities need a new narrative that focuses on the distinctive purposes and contributions of public universities and is geared toward re-establishing the historic covenant between citizens and their universities. It is not enough for this new narrative to be espoused by educational and civic leaders; it must also be embraced by faculty and staff. Every public university should focus on defining its public purposes and developing plans to communicate those purposes to their constituents and the public.

One critical element in such a narrative would be the significance of affording opportunity for higher education for all capable students. When data show that high school graduates in the highest quartile of ability and the lowest quartile of economic capability pursue higher education in no greater percentage than high school graduates in the lowest quartile of ability, but in the highest quartile of economic capability, we clearly have a significant problem that does not portend well for our common future. AASCU has commendably taken a leadership role advocating that *all* capable students be afforded opportunity. While opportunity must be afforded, we must also ensure that opportunity is affordable. This latter point was persuasively enunciated by Dr. F. King Alexander, who pointed out that the university he formerly led, California State University, Long Beach, enrolled more Pell Grant recipients than all the Ivy League institutions combined. The public good encompasses the importance of all segments of our population pursuing affordable higher education. That goal should be central to the public purpose commitment of virtually every public institution.

A second element needed in the public university's narrative is a commitment to the economic development of the region or state

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it serves. Unfortunately, this commitment is given more lip service than substantive support. Public institutions readily observe that they educate graduates who become part of the workforce, thereby suggesting a contribution to economic development. While true, we need to note that private institutions make the same claim. In the public's eye there is little differentiation between sectors relative to preparing graduates to enter the economic workforce. What needs to distinguish public universities is a commitment to instructional, applied research, and public service efforts targeting economic development needs in each state, with a special emphasis on inner cities and rural reaches that have sustained economic and demographic losses. This is a historic function of the public's universities and one needed today. A section of the original Morrill Act stipulated that each state provide an "annual report including state industrial and economic statistics." Implicit in this provision was an expectation for institutional engagement with economic development and some level of accountability to the public.

If public universities are truly to be "Stewards of Place," then a renewed focus on institutional commitment to the economic fortunes of its citizens is a reasonable expectation.

Public universities were created and expanded to serve the needs of the states and nation. They were not created to replicate private universities; they were established to be places of public purpose. For decades, honoring this mission has generated public support and decent, if not generous, financial appropriations. We need to ask ourselves to what degree the erosion of this commitment is related to the appreciable reduction in state financial support and the distressing decline in public approval, and how each public university should respond. **P**

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