

The Scholarship of Engagement

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Source: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Apr., 1996, Vol. 49, No. 7 (Apr., 1996), pp. 18-33

Published by: American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3824459

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Stated Meeting Report

The Scholarship of Engagement

Ernest L. Boyer

Let me begin with a self-evident observation: American higher education is, as Derek Bok once poetically described it, "a many-splendored creation." We have built in this country a truly remarkable network of research universities, regional campuses, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges, which have become, during the last half century, the envy of the world.

But it's also true that after years of explosive growth, America's colleges and universities are now suffering from a decline in public confidence and a nagging feeling that they are no longer at the vital center of the nation's work. Today the campuses in this country are not being called upon to win a global war or to build Quonset huts for returning GIs. They're not trying to beat the Soviets to the moon or to help implement the Great Society programs. It seems to me that for the first time in nearly half a century, institutions of higher learning are not collectively caught up in some urgent national endeavor.

Still, our outstanding universities and colleges remain, in my opinion, among the greatest sources of hope for intellectual and civic progress in this country. I'm convinced that for this hope to be fulfilled, the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems—and must reaffirm its historic commitment to

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Ernest L. Boyer, who died in December 1995, was president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *His communication was presented at the 1778th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on October 11, 1995.*

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what I have chosen to call, this evening, the *scholarship of engagement.*

The truth is that for more than 350 years, higher learning and the larger purposes of American society have been inextricably interlocked. The goal of the colonial college was to prepare civic and religious leaders—a vision succinctly captured by John Eliot, who wrote in 1636, "If we nourish not learning, both church and commonwealth will sink." Following the revolution, the great patriot Dr. Benjamin Rush declared, in 1798, that the nation's colleges would be "nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government." In 1824 Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was founded in Troy, New York; RPI was, according to historian Frederick Rudolph, a constant reminder that America needed railroad builders, bridge builders, builders of all kinds. During the dark days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the historic Land Grant Act, which linked higher learning to the nation's agricultural, technological, and industrial revolutions. And when social critic Lincoln Steffens visited Madison in 1909, he observed that "in Wisconsin, the university is as close to the intelligent farmer as his pig-pen or his tool-house."

At the beginning of this century, David Starr Jordan, president of that brash new institution on the West Coast, Stanford, declared that the entire university movement in this country "is toward reality and practicality." Harvard's president, Charles Eliot, who was completing nearly forty years of tenure, said America's universities are filled with the democratic spirit of "serviceableness." And in 1896 Woodrow Wilson, then a forty-year-old Princeton University professor, insisted that the spirit of service will give a college a place in the public annals of the nation. "We dare not," he said, "keep aloof and closet ourselves while a nation comes to its maturity."

Frankly, I find it quite remarkable that just one hundred years ago, the words *practicality* and *reality* and *serviceability* were used by the

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nation's most distinguished academic leaders to describe the mission of higher learning—which was, to put it simply, the scholarship of engagement. During my own lifetime, Vannevar Bush of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology formally declared, while in Washington serving two presidents, that universities that helped win the war could also win the peace—a statement that led to the greatest federally funded research effort the world has ever known. I find it fascinating to recall that Bush cited radar and penicillin to illustrate how science could be of practical service to the nation. The goals in the creation of the National Science Foundation—which led to the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health—were not abstract. The goals were rooted in practical reality and aimed toward useful ends.

In the 1940s the GI Bill brought eight million veterans back to campus, which sparked in this country a revolution of rising expectations. May I whisper that professors were not at the forefront urging the GI Bill; this initiative came from Congress. Many academics, in fact, questioned the wisdom of inviting GIs to campus; after all, these men hadn't passed the SATs—they'd simply gone off to war, and what did they know except survival? The story gets even grimmer. I read some years ago that the dean of admissions at one of the well-known institutions in the country opposed the GIs because, he argued, many of them would be married; they would bring baby carriages to campus, and even contaminate the young undergraduates with bad ideas at that pristine institution. I think he knew little about GIs and even less about the undergraduates at his own college.

But putting that resistance aside, the point is largely made that the universities joined in an absolutely spectacular experiment, in a cultural commitment to rising expectations—and what was for the GIs a privilege became for their children and grandchildren an absolute right. And there's no turning back.

Almost coincidentally, Secretary of State

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George C. Marshall, in 1947, at a commencement exercise at Harvard, announced a plan for European recovery, and the Marshall Plan sent scholars all around the world to promote social and economic progress. Ten years later, when the Soviets sent *Sputnik* rocketing into orbit, the nation's colleges and universities were called upon once again, this time to design better curricula for the nation's schools and to offer summer institutes for teachers. And one still stumbles onto the inspiration of that time. I remember having a lunch in Washington. We thought we were talking privately about the federal program to help teachers under the Eisenhower administration, only to find we were being overheard at the next table, which you should always assume in Washington. And the man stopped by and said, "I just wanted to tell you that I was one of the NDEA [National Defense Education Act] fellows at that time, and I've never had a better experience in my life." The inspiration of the teachers who came back from the summer institutes touched teachers all across the country. The federal government and higher education had joined with schools toward the renewal of public education.

Then, in the 1960s, almost every college and university in this country launched affirmative action programs to recruit historically bypassed students and to promote, belatedly, human justice.

I realize I've just dashed through three and a half centuries in three and a half minutes, more or less. What I failed to mention were the times when universities challenged the established order, when they acted appropriately both as conscience and social critic, and that, too, was in service to the nation. And there were other times when campuses were on the fringes of larger national endeavors, standing on the sidelines, failing to take advantage of opportunities that emerged. Still, I am left with two inescapable conclusions. First, it seems absolutely clear that this nation has, throughout the years, gained enor-

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mously from its vital network of higher learning institutions. At the same time it's also quite apparent that the confidence of the nation's campuses themselves has grown during those times when academics have been called upon to serve a larger purpose—to participate in the building of a more just society and to make the nation more civil and secure.

This leads me to say a word about the partnership today. To what extent has higher learning in the nation continued this collaboration, this commitment to the common good?

I hope I don't distort reality when I suggest that in recent years, the work of individual scholars as researchers has continued to be highly prized, and that also, in recent years, teaching has increasingly become more highly regarded, which of course is great cause for celebration. But it seems to me that it's also true that at far too many institutions of higher learning, the historic commitment to the scholarship of engagement, as I've chosen to call it, has dramatically declined.

I do a lot of work with colleges and universities, and study countless catalogs, and it won't surprise you to hear that almost every college catalog in this country still lists teaching, research, and service as the priorities of the professoriate. And yet it won't surprise you either that at tenure and promotion time, the harsh truth is that service is hardly mentioned. Even more disturbing, faculty who do spend time on so-called applied projects frequently jeopardize their careers.

Russell Jacoby, in a fascinating book entitled *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, observes that the influence of American academics has declined precisely because being an intellectual has come to mean being in the university and holding a faculty appointment (preferably a tenured one), writing in a certain style understood only by one's peers, and conforming to an academic rewards system that encourages disengagement and even penalizes professors

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whose work becomes useful to nonacademics—or *popularized*, as we like to say. Intellectual life, Jacoby said, has moved from the coffee shop to the cafeteria, with academics participating less vigorously in the broader public discourse.

But what I find most disturbing, as almost the mirror image of that description, is a growing feeling in this country that higher education is in fact part of the problem rather than the solution—going still further, that it's become a private benefit, not a public good. Increasingly, the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems. Indeed, there follows from that the concept that if students are the beneficiaries and get credentialed, then let students pay the bill. And I've been almost startled to see that when the gap increases in the budget, it's the student, and the student fees, that are turned to automatically—after all, it's a private benefit, and let the consumer, as we like to say, pay the bill.

Not that long ago, it was generally assumed that higher education was an investment in the future of the nation—that the intellect of the nation was something too valuable to lose, and that we needed to invest in the future through the knowledge industry.

I often think about the time when I moved, almost overnight, from an academic post in Albany, New York, to a government post in Washington, DC. These were two completely separate worlds. At the university, looking back, I recall rarely having serious dialogues with "outsiders"—artists or "popular" authors or other intellectuals beyond the campus. And yet I was fascinated by Derek Bok's observation, on leaving his tenured post at Harvard, that the most consequential shifts in public policy in recent years have come not from academics but from such works as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Ralph Nader's

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Unsafe at Any Speed, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—books that truly place environmental, industrial, economic, and gender issues squarely in a social context.

I teach occasionally at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs [Princeton University], and I open the first class by asking, "How is public policy shaped in America? Where does it originate? How does the debate get going?" Almost always, the undergraduates will start with the president, then Congress—or they might think of the state legislature. Then I ask them if they have ever heard of Rachel Carson or Michael Harrington, and a kind of bewildered look appears. And yet the truth is that out of the seminal insights of these intellectuals, public discourse begins—and very often Congress is the last, not the first, to act, trying to catch up with the shifting culture. So it is with the academy. One wonders why discourse between faculty and intellectuals working without campus affiliation can't take place within the academy itself.

But on the other hand, I left Albany and went to Washington, and I must tell you that I found government to be equally—or, to go one step further, even more startlingly—detached. In Washington we did consult, I want to assure you, with lawyers and political pressure groups, driven usually by legislative mandates and certainly by White House urges. But rarely were academics invited in to help put our policy decisions in historical or social or ethical perspective. Looking back, I recall that we talked for literally hundreds of hours about the procedural aspects of our work and the legal implications, but I do not recall one occasion when someone asked, "Should we be doing this in the first place?"—a question, I suspect, that could have been asked only by a detached participant with both courage and perspective.

Recently, I've become impressed by just how much this problem, which I would describe as impoverished cultural discourse, ex-

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tends beyond government to mass communication, in which—perhaps with the exception of *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* and *Bill Moyers' Journal*—the nation's most pressing social, economic, and civil issues are endlessly discussed primarily by politicians and self-proclaimed pundits, while university scholars rarely are invited to join the conversation.

Abundant evidence shows that both the civic and academic health of any culture is vitally enriched as scholars and practitioners speak and listen carefully to each other. In a brilliant study of creative communities throughout history, Princeton University sociologist Carl Schorske, a man I greatly admire, describes the Basel, Switzerland, of the nineteenth century as a truly vibrant place where civic and university life were inseparably intertwined. Schorske states that the primary function of the university in Basel was to foster what he called "civic culture," while the city of Basel assumed that one of its basic obligations was the advancement of learning. The university was engaged in civic advancement, the city was engaged in intellectual advancement, and the two were joined. I read recently that one of the most influential commentators achieved his fame not from published articles but from lectures he gave in the Basel open forum.

I recognize, of course, that "town" is not "gown." The university must vigorously protect its political and intellectual independence. Still, one does wonder what would happen if the university would extend itself more productively into the marketplace of ideas. I find it fascinating, for example, that the provocative Public Broadcasting Service program *Washington Week in Review* invites us to consider current events from the perspective of four or five distinguished journalists who, during the rest of the week, tend to talk only to themselves. I've wondered occasionally what *Washington Week in Review* would sound like if a historian, an astronomer, an economist, an artist, a theologian, and perhaps a physician, for example, were asked to

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comment. Would we be listening and thinking about the same week, or would there be a different profile and perspective? How many different weeks were there that week? And who is interpreting them for America?

What are we to do about all of this? As a first step, and coming back to the academy itself, I'm convinced that the university has an obligation to broaden the scope of scholarship. In a recent Carnegie Foundation report entitled *Scholarship Reconsidered,* we propose a new paradigm of scholarship, one that assigns to the professoriate four essential, interlocking functions. We propose, first, the *scholarship of discovery,* insisting that universities, through research, simply must continue to push back the frontiers of human knowledge. No one, it seems to me, can even consider that issue contestable. And we argue, in our report, against shifting research inordinately to government institutes or even to the laboratories of corporations that could directly or indirectly diminish the free flow of ideas.

But while research is essential, we argue that it is not sufficient, and to avoid pedantry, we propose a second priority, called the *scholarship of integration.* There is, we say, an urgent need to place discoveries in a larger context and create more interdisciplinary conversations in what Michael Polanyi of the University of Chicago has called the "overlapping [academic] neighborhoods"—or in the new hyphenated disciplines, in which the energies of several different disciplines tend enthusiastically to converge. In fact, as Clifford Geertz of the Institute for Advanced Study has argued, we need a new formulation, a new paradigm of knowledge, since the new questions don't fit the old categories.

Speaking of bringing the disciplines together, several years ago, when physicist Victor Weisskopf was asked what gave him hope in troubled times, he replied, "Mozart and quantum mechanics." But where in our fragmented intellectual world do academics make connections such as these? We assume

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they live in separate worlds, yet they may be searching for the same interesting patterns and relationships, and finding solutions both intellectually compelling and aesthetic. I remember that during the days of the liftoffs at Cape Kennedy, when the rockets lifted successfully into orbit, the engineers wouldn't say, "Well, our formulas worked again"; they would say, almost in unison, "Beautiful." I always found it fascinating that they chose an aesthetic term to describe a technological achievement. But where do the two begin and end?

Beyond the scholarship of discovering knowledge and integrating knowledge, we propose in our report a third priority: the *scholarship of sharing knowledge.* Scholarship, we say, is a communal act. You never get tenured for research alone. You get tenured for research and publication, which means you have to teach somebody what you've learned. And academics must continue to communicate—not only with their peers but also with future scholars in the classroom—in order to keep the flame of scholarship alive. Yet the harsh truth is that on many campuses, it's much better to prepare a paper and present it to colleagues at the Hyatt in Chicago than to present it to the students right on campus, who perhaps have more future prospects than one's peers.

Finally, in *Scholarship Reconsidered,* we call not only for the scholarship of discovering knowledge, not only for the scholarship of integrating knowledge to avoid pedantry, not only for the sharing of knowledge to avoid discontinuity, but also for the application of knowledge to avoid irrelevance. And we hurriedly add that when we speak of applying knowledge, we do not mean "doing good," although that's important. Academics have their civic functions, which should be honored, but by *scholarship of application* we mean having professors become what Donald Schön of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has called "reflective practitioners," moving from theory to practice, and from

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practice back to theory, which in fact makes theory, then, more authentic—something we're learning in education and medicine, in law and architecture, and all the rest. Incidentally, by "making knowledge useful," we mean everything from building better bridges to building better lives, which involves not only the professional schools but the arts and sciences as well.

Philosophy and religion also are engaged in the usefulness of knowledge, as insights become the interior of one's life. Recently, I reread Jacob Bronowski's moving essay on science and human values, which, as you recall, was written after his visit in 1945 to the devastation of Hiroshima. In that provocative document, he suggests that no sharp boundaries can be drawn between knowledge and its uses. And he insists that the convenient labels of "pure" and "applied" research simply do not describe the way most scientists really work. To illustrate his point, Bronowski notes that Sir Isaac Newton studied astronomy precisely because navigating the sea was the preoccupation of the society in which he was born. Newton was, to put it simply, an engaged scholar. And Michael Faraday, Bronowski writes, sought to link electricity to magnetism because finding a new source of power was the preoccupation of his day. Faraday's scholarship was considered useful. The issue, then, Bronowski concludes, is not whether scholarship will be applied but whether the work of scholars will be directed toward humane ends.

This reminder that the work of the academy ultimately must be directed toward larger, more humane ends brings me to this conclusion: I'm convinced that in the century ahead, higher education in this country has an urgent obligation to become more vigorously engaged in the issues of our day, just as the land grant colleges helped farmers and technicians a century ago. And surely one of the most urgent issues we confront, perhaps the social crisis that is the most compelling, is the tragic plight of children.

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In his first State of the Union Address, President George Bush declared that the nation's first education goal was that by the year 2000, all children in this country would come to school "ready to learn." Yet we have more children in poverty today than we did five years ago. Today a shocking percentage of the nation's nineteen million preschoolers are malnourished and educationally impoverished. Several years ago, when we at the Carnegie Foundation surveyed several thousand kindergarten teachers, we learned that thirty-five percent of the children who enrolled in school the year before were, according to the teachers, linguistically, emotionally, or physically deficient. One wonders how this nation can live comfortably with the fact that so many of our children are so shockingly impoverished.

These statistics may seem irrelevant in the hallowe l halls of the academy or in the greater world of higher learning, yet education is a seamless web. If children do not have a good beginning—if they do not receive the nurture and support they need during the first years of life—it will be difficult, if not impossible, fully to compensate for the failure later on. My wife, a certified midwife, has convinced me that the effort has to be made not only before school but surely before birth itself, during the time when nutrition becomes inextricably linked to later potential.

To start, higher education must conduct more research in child development and health care and nutrition. I do not diminish this role at all. This too is in service to the nation. But I wonder if universities also might take the lead in creating children's councils in the communities that surround them. The role of the universities would be to help coordinate the work of public and private agencies concerned with children, preparing annually, perhaps, what I've chosen to call a "ready to learn" report card—a kind of environmental impact statement on the physical, social, and emotional conditions affecting children, accompanied by a cooperative

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plan of action that would bring academics and practitioners together. James Agee, one of my favorite twentieth-century American authors, wrote that with every child born, under no matter what circumstances, the potential of the human race is born again. And with such a remarkably rich array of intellectual resources, certainly the nation's universities, through research and the scholarship of engagement, can help make it possible for more children to be "ready to learn." Perhaps universities can even help create in this country a public love of children.

A second challenge, I'm convinced, is that colleges and universities must become more actively engaged with the nation's schools. We hear a lot of talk these days about how the schools have failed, and surely education must improve—but the longer the debate continues, the more I become convinced that it's not the schools that have failed; it's the partnership that has failed. Today our nation's schools are being called upon to do what homes and churches and communities have not been able to accomplish. And if they fail anywhere along the line, we condemn them for not meeting our high-minded expectations. Yet I've concluded that it's simply impossible to have an island of excellence in a sea of community indifference. After going to schools from coast to coast, I've also begun to wonder whether most school critics could survive one week in the classrooms they condemn. While commissioner of education, I visited an urban school with a leaky roof, broken test tubes, Bunsen burners that wouldn't work, textbooks ten years old, falling plaster, armed guards at the door—and we wonder why we're not world-class in math and science, or in anything, for that matter.

Especially troublesome is our lack of support for teachers. In the United States today, teachers spend an average of $400 of their own money each year, according to our surveys, to buy essential school supplies. They're expected to teach thirty-one hours every week, with virtually no time for preparation.

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The average kindergarten class size in this country is twenty-seven pupils, even though research reveals it should be seventeen. In one state the average kindergarten class size is forty-one. I've never taught kindergarten or first grade, but I do have several grandchildren, and when I take them to McDonald's or some other fast-food spot, I come home a basket case from just keeping mustard off the floor and tracking all the orders that keep changing every thirty seconds. And I'm not even trying to cram them for the SATs—I'm just trying to keep body and soul together. Class size does matter, especially in the early years, and it correlates directly with effective learning.

About a dozen years ago, the late Bart Giamatti invited me to evaluate what was called the Yale–New Haven Teacher's Institute. I was delighted to discover that some of Yale's most distinguished scholars directed summer seminars based on curricula that teachers themselves had planned. Incidentally, teachers in that program were called Yale Fellows—and, I was startled to discover, they were even given parking spaces on campus, which is about the highest status symbol a university can bestow. I'm suggesting that every college and university should view surrounding schools as partners; should give teaching scholarships to gifted high school students, just as we give athletic scholarships; and should offer summer institutes for teachers, who are, I'm convinced, the unsung heroes of the nation.

During my Yale visit, I dropped in on a sixth-grade classroom in New Haven. Thirty children were crowded around the teacher's desk, and I thought it was a physical attack—I almost ran to the central office for help. But then I paused and discovered they were there not out of anger but out of intense enthusiasm. They had just finished reading Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, and they were vigorously debating whether little Oliver could survive in their own neighborhood—speaking of relating the great books and intellectual in-

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quiry to the realities of life. The children concluded that while Oliver had made it in far-off London, he'd never make it in New Haven, a much tougher city. I was watching an inspired teacher at work, relating serious literature to the lives of urban youth today.

This leads me to say a word about higher education in the nation's cities. It's obvious that the problems of urban life are enormously complex; there are no simple solutions. Yet cities determine the future of this country—and many of our nation's children live in them. And I find it ironic that universities, which focused with such energy on rural America a century ago, have never focused with equal urgency on our cities. Many universities do have sponsored projects in urban areas—Detroit, Buffalo, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, to name just a few. But typically, these so-called model programs limp along, supported with soft money. Especially troublesome is the fact that academics who participate are not professionally rewarded. Higher education cannot do it all, but Ira Harkavy of the University of Pennsylvania soberly warns that our great universities simply cannot afford to remain islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair. With their schools of medicine, law, and education and their public policy programs, universities surely can help put our cities and perhaps—perhaps—even our nation back together.

Here, then, is my conclusion. At one level, the scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities—just to name the ones I am personally in touch with most frequently; you could name others. Campuses would be viewed by both students and professors not as isolated islands but as staging grounds for action.

But at a deeper level I have this growing conviction that we need not just more pro-

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grams but also a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life as we move toward century twenty-one. Increasingly, I'm convinced that ultimately, the scholarship of engagement means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge what anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes as the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us.

Many years ago Oscar Handlin put the challenge this way: "[A] troubled universe can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower. . . . [S]cholarship has to prove its worth not on its own terms, but by service to the nation and the world." This, in the end, is what the scholarship of engagement is all about—and, indeed, what the American Academy of Arts and Sciences provides precisely: a forum in which the nation can confront its mission in a larger, more enlightened sense.

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