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Informed by an interdisciplinary body of scholarship yet focusing on developmental challenges and competencies of the young adult years, this chapter argues that public scholarship is the best form of education for young adults in democracies.

Public Scholarship and Youth at the Transition to Adulthood

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In this chapter I argue three points: First, that public scholarship is the right form of education, given the developmental imperatives and competencies of individuals on the brink of adulthood; second, that it is the right form of learning in light of the challenges younger generations face in an unpredictable world; and third, that public scholarship benefits democracy by nurturing democratic dispositions and competencies in younger generations.

Public scholarship is a particular approach to the goals and methods of higher education and to the work of the academy. It emphasizes knowledge as a public good, collectively constructed and applied toward purposes that benefit the commonwealth (Cohen, 2005). Because knowledge is collaboratively constructed, those who participate in its construction develop particular civic habits, dispositions, and skills in the process. And because knowledge is applied toward public purposes, participating in its production nurtures a sense of “the public” in younger generations.

Public scholarship neither denies nor ignores the university’s role in credentialing students for jobs. In fact, it may enhance students’ potential for finding jobs (if it enlarges their social networks, creativity, perspectives, and self-confidence) although that is not its primary goal. Whereas “human capital” models use a banking metaphor for learning, focusing on the economic returns to the individual of additional years of education, public scholarship emphasizes the democratic purposes of education. It also contests a narrow “expert-driven” model of science that is housed in disciplinary silos where students are trained to think and speak in ways that exclude



the public. Knowledge is less likely to be objective or scientific if it is produced by an elite than if it is held accountable to the scrutiny of a broad public.

Public Scholarship in Young Adulthood

Why is public scholarship the right form of education, given the developmental imperatives and competencies of individuals at the brink of adulthood? The answer is that individuals at this age are at their prime cognitively, are pressed psychologically to figure out a course for their lives, and are relatively free from social roles and obligations.

The early adult years—roughly the third decade of life—are a time in life for taking stock—of oneself and one’s society. These are the years when people have to decide how they will earn a living, what they are good at, and what they care about. It also is a time when individuals reflect more deeply on the purpose of their lives, on their beliefs, and on the values they stand for. In answering these questions, young adults inevitably have to grapple with societal issues. To the extent that this reflective process is a collaborative one, students should learn not only that many of their private concerns are shared but also that resolving those concerns is not something individuals must, or are likely to, accomplish alone.

Although young adults face certain developmental imperatives, those who are unmarried, childless, and in college are less saddled with responsibilities or social roles than they will be a few years down the road. They are free to explore different ideas, values, lifestyles, religious and cultural traditions, and political views. And they are often in settings like colleges where they are exposed to more alternative perspectives on social issues than they were in high school. Thus, college is a setting where young people have the chance to form new political reference groups. In a phrase, college students can experience what Mannheim (1952) referred to as a *fresh contact* with their social order, seeing it from new perspectives. For this reason, generational theorists contend that early adulthood can be a politically defining time with lifelong consequences.

With respect to cognitive capacities, optimal levels of abstract reasoning and reflective thinking are attained in the early adult years. Typically, it is not until late in the second or early in the third decade of life that people genuinely integrate different points of view as they form opinions. Although adolescents can deal with abstract concepts and viewpoints, it is usually in the early adult years that they can coordinate several abstract systems together and appreciate the subtleties in abstract relations, including understanding themselves and others.

Young adults are more capable than adolescents of understanding the implications of their own (as well as states’ or corporations’) actions on abstract “others.” They also understand the consequences of their own and others’

actions over time. Thus twenty-somethings are better than teens at understanding the lifetime impact of passive smoking on a nonsmoking spouse or of hydrocarbons on the ozone layer. Young adults appreciate principled reasoning and can separate another person's political views from their friendship with that individual. They should, therefore, be able to passionately debate political issues without personalizing the differences. Compared to adolescents and to their own parents, young adults are more committed to civil liberties and are more tolerant of points of view that differ from their own.

Young adulthood is an optimal time for reflective thinking, for examining the bases of ideas and opinions. However, that capacity is more likely to develop when ideas are challenged by opposing information or points of view (Fisher, Yan, and Stewart, 2003). In other words, any undergraduate student should have the innate capacity for reflective judgment. However, it is in the context of Socratic dialogue, where ideas that are taken for granted are examined, or in encounters with heterogeneous groups, where different views are aired, that reflective judgment is likely to reach an optimal level.

However potentially unsettling, having their views challenged helps young people to clarify and crystallize their beliefs. Longitudinal studies comparing students who attended college in the 1960s with their peers who did not revealed that, although political attitudes were shaken up by the college experience, in midlife those who went to college were more clear about where they stood on issues (Jennings, 2002).

Public Scholarship and the Challenges of an Unpredictable World

I turn now to my second point: Public scholarship is the right form of learning in light of the challenges younger generations face in an unpredictable world. Becoming an independent adult may be more problematic at the turn of the twenty-first century than it was in previous eras. Compared to the relatively orderly sequence that marked the transition to adulthood for many (especially for middle-class whites) in earlier generations, no modal pattern reflects the experiences of younger generations today. In fact, a longer historical lens suggests that the decades after World War II were unique in terms of the relatively orderly sequence (education, jobs, marriage, and family) and narrow band of years in which most people moved from adolescence into adulthood. Nonetheless, compared to what their parents and grandparents experienced, there are more diverse and less predictable pathways today. Young people may enjoy more freedom and autonomy, but without guidance and support they also are likely to feel confused and anxious. Although freedom is good for the human spirit, too much choice, especially for those who try to maximize personal benefits from those choices, is bad for mental health and well-being (Schwartz, 2004).

Perhaps the biggest challenges to becoming an independent adult today are the shifting rules and demands of the labor market. For entering college freshmen, it is unclear how education and jobs are coupled and which sectors of the economy will be seeking employees when they graduate. Maximizing their competitive edge is clearly on the minds of young people. Many undergraduates are hedging their bets in an unpredictable market by accumulating credentials, juggling double, and in some cases, triple majors. "For students who spent their high school years pursuing Advanced Placement credits, high test scores, and prestigious extracurricular activities, the multiple major seems to be the next big thing" (Lewin, 2002, p. 22).

During the 1970s and 1980s, decades of deindustrialization, we told young people that to get good jobs in the new economy they should continue their formal education beyond high school. Although education continues to be essential for better jobs, a college degree is no guarantee of steady work in a global marketplace. Increasingly, "returns to education" in terms of a match between training and market demands are elusive. Analyses of work and earnings trends since the 1970s point to declines in job tenure and increases in self-employment and in contingent (part-time and short-term contract) work (Bluestone and Rose, 1997). Between 1946 and 1972, changes in employment were more likely to be associated with promotions and raises. Since then, changes are more likely to be associated with demotion, unemployment, and displacement to other careers (Carnavale, 1995).

From the 1970s through the end of the century, there also were disconcerting trends in the mental health and values of young adults: anxiety and materialism increased and social trust declined (Rahn and Transue, 1998; Twenge, 2000). Like older adults, those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five have lost confidence in many institutions. But they also are less likely than their elders (and less likely than were young adults in earlier eras) to feel that people in general are fair, helpful, and trustworthy rather than out for their own gain. Whether there is any relationship between personal anxieties and these misanthropic views about "others" is unclear. However, trends in materialist values over the past two decades do predict declines in social trust among younger generations during those same years (Rahn and Transue, 1998). Summarizing the work of the National Commission for Employment Policy, Carnavale attributed the anxieties Americans are experiencing to a lack of institutional guidance and connections: . . . "Economic change is not new. What is new in this particular economic transition is the erosion of public confidence in the basic institutions customarily charged with guiding us safely through change. . . . As a result, Americans are anxious about their prospects and angry that the rules are changing in the middle of the game" (Carnavale, 1995, p. viii).

Universities are one of the main institutions charged with guiding younger generations as they make the transition to adulthood. In light of the profound social and economic changes younger generations face, to act

as if job training is the only function universities serve is a rather myopic view of their role.

Furthermore, the public endorses the important role that universities play in developing civic competencies and leadership in students. In March 2004, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* commissioned a national survey of public opinion on higher education. When asked about the important roles that a college should perform, 92 percent of respondents rated “preparing undergraduates for a career” as important or very important. But “preparing students to be responsible citizens” and “preparing future leaders of society” were endorsed as very important or important by 87 percent and 88 percent, respectively (Selingo, 2004, p. 1).

So what alternative does public scholarship offer that would help undergraduates navigate an uncertain world? First, it offers an alternative to jobs or careers as the primary source of personal identity and meaning. Thomas Jefferson noted that democracy suffered if citizens cared only about making a living when he wrote, “If people forget themselves in the sole faculty of making money . . . the future of the republic will be bleak and tyranny will not be far away.” But there also are psychological costs to the individual of such singular investment of time and meaning.

If the vagaries of an unpredictable job market are a fact that future generations will live with, and if, as Richard Sennett contends (1998, p. 20), “no long term” accurately describes employers’ commitments, then it is futile to make jobs the main source of personal meaning. Public scholarship reminds students that being a member of the public also is a source of meaning. It gives them reasons to care about public schools, parks, health, and welfare. It helps them see how their own (self-) interests are linked with these broader (public) goods. In his book *Radical Democracy* (1997), C. Douglas Lummis distinguishes private from public hope. The former reflects optimism about one’s own future and that of one’s loved ones, the latter a belief in the possibilities of democracy, a faith in the collective will of the people to improve the world. I am not suggesting that we should encourage our students to abandon their private hopes, only that private hopes may be elusive and that an individual’s esteem is likely to suffer if a career is his or her only source of meaning.

Second, public scholarship helps students cope with uncertainty by providing sources of social connectedness and support. Coping with uncertainty and anxiety is part of being human, but it is more difficult when we do it alone. In public scholarship students experience what it is like to be part of something that is larger than themselves. They see how their individual opinions and contributions matter to the collective work and thus how they matter to the group. The social bonds formed through this process make it easier for young people to live with ambiguity.

Most public issues are complicated and may seem overwhelming to individuals. But, through public scholarship, students can see that the burden of

solving public problems is not shouldered by individuals. They should also learn that political goals are rarely accomplished by individuals acting alone. Furthermore, because political questions are complex, it is tempting to avoid them or to find for them “right” and “wrong” answers. Young (and for that matter older) adults may be tempted by the comfort of fundamentalist views, or they may take a relativistic noncommittal and noncritical stance on issues. Practice in public scholarship should help anyone who engages in it to be open-minded but not relativistic, to be comfortable with complexity but to realize the importance of taking a stand. Public scholarship does not tell students what the truth is, but it does inculcate in them the capacity to determine, with fellow members of the public, where the truth lies and what a just resolution of issues might be.

Public Scholarship and Democratic Dispositions Among Young Adults

This segues to my final point: Public scholarship benefits democracy by nurturing certain habits, dispositions, and skills in younger generations. I nominate the following as candidates for these personal underpinnings for democracy: an ethic of civic participation, judgment informed by divergent perspectives, tolerance, and social trust.

Derived from the Greek *demos* and *kratos*, democracy refers to rule by or sovereignty of the people. If the public isn’t civically engaged, democracy doesn’t work. But as Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) point out in *Voice and Equality*, rational choice theories predict that it is smarter for citizens to take a free ride rather than spend their own time on activities that benefit the common good. “The puzzle of participation thus becomes: how are we to explain the fact that millions of citizens, in apparent defiance of this elegant logic, vote or take part in various kinds of voluntary activity on behalf of collective ends?” (p. 100). Their answer is that the benefit of participation includes the satisfaction gained from “doing one’s share to make the community, nation, or world a better place” (p. 103).

One of the most consistent findings from the scholarship on service learning is that young people find that engaging in service makes them feel useful and that it feels good to do something that benefits others. In other words, they feel that they matter, that their actions make a difference, and they get a personal boost, a feeling of benevolence from helping others. Public scholarship builds on the goodwill orientation of many service-learning programs. It shares with service learning the goals of moving beyond credentials as the sole purpose of education and of linking classroom content and practice. And it applauds the satisfaction students gain from doing their share. But its focus is on knowledge and learning, not on service. In past generations community work was often a bridge to politics, but there is some concern that young people today see community work as

an alternative to politics. Whereas they feel effective when doing community service, they feel ineffective in politics, which many consider corrupt and ineffectual (Galston, 2001). If the efforts of universities to involve students in service or outreach diminish the younger generation's engagement in political discourse and action, then those efforts undermine the public purposes of higher education.

Alexis de Tocqueville ([1848] 1969), an early observer of American mores, referred to voluntary community associations as the "schools of democracy" where the ties one felt to fellow citizens served to moderate the individual's commitment to narrow self-interest. Engaging in public scholarship should help students appreciate how their own interests are realized in the public's interests and thus help them see why they should have a stake in democracy. As academics we may overestimate the rational bases for action and forget the affective or emotional ones. But feeling a sense of solidarity with a group motivates action, including political action, on behalf of the group.

Civic engagement also is correlated with an awareness that public issues are controversial and that it matters to take a stand. Jennings (2002) found that adults at midlife who had participated in political protest as youth were more likely than their uninvolved peers to be engaged in conventional politics and to encourage a civic ethic, including volunteer work, in their children. Even before students enter college, they are more likely to be interested and engaged in political issues if discussion and debate is encouraged in their classes. When students understand that most historical events are decided after long periods of struggle between groups who saw the issues differently, they begin to see that, by taking a stand, they help to make history.

Besides a civically engaged public, democracies depend on citizens who are capable of making autonomous decisions free from control or interference by the state. The "good citizen" is not necessarily the one who follows the rules. Rather, the good citizen is one who deliberates on the rules and contests them when they are unjust. It was good citizens in the civil rights movement, for example, who challenged laws of segregation. Holding up what we take for granted to public scrutiny and making what we "know" accountable to the values and experiences of a diverse public beyond the academy are goals of public scholarship. Students should thus learn that the way things are is not the way they have to be.

In public scholarship, students learn to grapple with divergent perspectives, to reflect on their own views, and to question the status quo. They learn how to engage in civil debate, to assert their own and listen to others' perspectives, to deliberate and find common ground. Both individuals and democracy benefit when individuals work with diverse others and grapple with different perspectives.

In everyday decision making, we solicit one another's opinions because we think it will improve our choices, and there is considerable evidence

from studies of organizational behavior and group dynamics to suggest that it does. Individual judgments benefit from integrating others' opinions, especially if those opinions are different from one's own. Likewise, problem solving, creativity, and productivity improve when groups are more heterogeneous. College students' perspectives on issues are less likely to be simplistic if those individuals have racially diverse friends and classmates. Laboratory studies have also shown that, by increasing the racial or opinion diversity of a group, it is possible to increase the members' abilities to see multiple sides of issues (Antonio and others, 2004).

Why would heterogeneous encounters improve an individual's judgment or creativity? First, when we are confronted by challenges from others, we are forced to reflect on our own ideas and perspectives and possibly accommodate. Second, a diverse group helps us think outside the box by suggesting alternative ways of approaching a problem or of understanding a phenomenon. Third, working with people who are different from us helps break down our group stereotypes. The economic, racial, and age segregation of most housing—and therefore most K–12 schools—means that the average adolescent is likely to have little experience in intergroup relations prior to college. Yet most will work in a world where employers want employees to have such skills. The importance of these skills was the reason that many corporations and the U.S. military weighed in on the side of the University of Michigan in the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the University of Michigan's affirmative action practices in undergraduate student selection.

Next, public scholarship should benefit democracy if it develops tolerance in students. By tolerance I do not mean apathy or indifference to the views of others but rather a commitment to the civil liberties of those whose ideologies one opposes, a commitment to their right to voice their views. The stronger one's commitment to democratic norms (the rights of minorities, freedom of speech and assembly, and so on), the stronger one's commitment to tolerance. Tolerance is not a natural proclivity. Thus, we have to be proactive in socializing it, and the young adult years are a time when we are most ripe for such socialization. Tolerance is associated with an openness to new experiences, with optimism, and with trust. If public scholarship is a means for getting engaged with diverse groups, it should promote students' openness to new experiences.

Finally, engaging in public scholarship can also contribute to democracy's stock of social trust. In discussions of civil society, two kinds of trust are distinguished: interpersonal or *bonding* trust with people we know well, and social or *bridging* trust with others who are less familiar or who we may not know at all. Bridging trust is important in a democratic society because it extends the radius of "others" who are included as members of the public beyond the narrow enclaves of family and friends.

In addition, social trust is important in a democratic society where authority is vested in the people. When there is a general expectation that

people will not harm or take advantage of one another, there is no need for heavy-handedness by the state. People can be expected to live by the rules, to cooperate, to pitch in. As Dewey (1916) argued in *Democracy and Education*, because a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest. In fact, people who have high levels of trust in others are likely to join civic organizations, to vote, and generally to pitch in. At the same time, belonging to an organization does little for our inclination to trust people we do not know unless the organization has a diverse membership or engages in service to others (Uslaner, 2002).

Winston Churchill referred to democracy as “the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Abraham Lincoln considered democracy the “last, best hope on earth.” Although it is widely valued as a form of government, democracy has meant different things in different periods of our history. Whereas at certain periods the liberal tradition of individual rights has predominated, at other times the civic republican tradition emphasizing principles of equality, the common good, and inclusion of disenfranchised groups has come to the fore (Sandel, 1996). And the personal meaning that democracy holds for a young person is strongly related to the personal and family values that that young person lives by (Flanagan and others, 2005).

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, there has been an emergent discussion among elites about the need for a broad public conversation on the core values that unite us as Americans and the direction in which we are headed as a society. Colleges and universities are settings where that conversation should happen. Chances are that young people are yearning for it.

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