

**RENEWING THE**  
**DEMOCRATIC**  
**PURPOSES**  
**OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

**AGB** ASSOCIATION OF  
GOVERNING BOARDS  
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

The  
Guardians  
Initiative™

Reclaiming the Public Trust

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The Guardians Initiative: Reclaiming the Public Trust™

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**Above all things I hope the education  
of the common people will be attended to,  
convinced that on their good sense we  
may rely with the most security for the  
preservation of a due degree of liberty.**

—Thomas Jefferson

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## Executive Summary

**T**he U.S. higher education system, in all of its diversity, is a product of democracy, having matured alongside the nation and its people over the course of nearly four centuries. Today, there is good evidence that colleges and universities contribute to the nation's civic health, educating students for citizenship and contributing to economic and social well-being. Yet public skepticism about the value of higher education, including its effectiveness as an engine of American democracy, is concerning. Much work remains to renew confidence in higher education's public purposes and civic outcomes. That responsibility belongs not only to academics but, essentially, to board members, who hold higher education institutions in trust.

### Takeaways for Trustees

- Democracy and higher education are inextricably linked in the United States.
- Democracy as a way of life—a social ethic—is a critical concept for understanding how to renew the value of American higher education.
- A healthy democracy requires engaged citizens, and engaged citizens require preparation and practice. Higher education is uniquely positioned to prepare engaged citizens, and evidence shows college-going is related positively to a lifetime of civic engagement.
- Democratic purpose in American higher education has a long and meaningful history, though in every generation it has been challenged by forces within colleges and universities and in American culture.
- Though there are signs of promise, today's crises in democracy and higher education are real, and those who have the privilege to lead must face them with imagination and resolve.

## Introduction

**“The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that... it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes.”**

Truman Commission on Higher Education, 1947

Today it seems remarkable that just 70 years ago, a commission charged by President Harry Truman to explore the state of education in the United States would conclude that the highest purposes of higher education were directly linked to the well-being of our democracy. Given recent public opinion polls that raise doubts across the political spectrum about the value of higher education, it is difficult to fathom how the Truman Commission’s six-volume report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, set such a compelling argument for reclaiming the public purposes of higher education.

Yet, from Cicero to Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey, education historically has been understood to be essential to the cultivation of civic virtues and habits of mind that characterize citizenship in a democratic society. We find in the founding documents of states and territories lofty language promoting the role of education. For example, Article 3 of the Ordinance for the Government of the Northwest Territory states: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged.” In such constitutional language, our predecessors provided the motivation for the founding of colleges and universities to serve the emerging republic. Far from coincidence, it was natural for the nation that would become the world’s leading democracy to also become home to nearly 5,000 colleges and universities.

### Truman Commission

The Truman Commission on Higher Education sought to radically increase access to higher education. Among the groundbreaking proposals the commission recommended were:

- Federal student aid programs;
- The elimination of discriminatory admissions criteria;
- The establishment of a robust public community college system, with programs tailored to the needs of specific locations and contexts; and
- A focus on adult education programs aimed at expanding academic offerings for nontraditional students.

## Education and Democracy Throughout History

**What greater or better gift can we offer the republic than to teach and instruct our youth?**

[Latin: Quod enim munus reipublicae afferre majus, meliusve possumus, quam si docemus atque erudimus juventutem?]

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

**Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.**

—James Madison

It is no accident that all democracies have put a high estimate upon education; that schooling has been their first care and enduring charge. Only through education can equality of opportunity be anything more than a phrase. Accidental inequalities of birth, wealth, and learning are always tending to restrict the opportunities of some as compared with those of others. Only free and continued education can counteract those forces which are always at work to restore, in however changed a form, feudal oligarchy.

**Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.**

—John Dewey

**Honest and earnest criticism** from those whose interests are most nearly touched—criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led—this is the **soul of democracy** and the safeguard of modern society.

—W.E.B. Du Bois

These longstanding historical, philosophical, and practical precedents are a reminder that a crucial role remains for higher education in this country. By embracing and building upon higher education's historic value, today's leaders can further strengthen American democracy. This requires board members, not just college and university presidents, to understand institutional roles in educating citizens, creating knowledge and innovation, training professionals and civil servants, driving economies, serving as a community partner and cultural center, and safeguarding free and open inquiry.

If this sector is to be an engine of democracy for generations to come, higher education's fiduciaries—those who hold American colleges and universities

**Education is the great American adventure,  
the world's most colossal democratic experiment.**

—Mary McLeod Bethune

in the public trust—must also acknowledge emergent challenges to democracy. These include crises of confidence in institutions, political polarization, the devaluation of evidence and truth, and deficient levels of civic engagement, to name a few. As fiduciaries, it is incumbent upon trustees, working with presidents and chancellors, to renew higher education's value to American democracy, not passively or tentatively, but with the same sense of purpose and intentional leadership that characterizes the sector's most aspirational traditions.

## Defining Democracy

It is commonplace for Americans to assume that democracy is summed up in the rights of individuals to vote and in the establishment of agencies and offices created to carry out the will of the people. Though voting and government systems are important, they are at best the machinery of democracy.

If we are to recover the essential links between higher education and democracy, we must embrace an understanding of **democracy as a way of life**, what social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Addams called “democracy as a social ethic.”

For higher education institutions, an understanding of democracy as a way of life has several implications. It means that the education they offer, aimed as it may be to particular careers, professions, and other walks of life, is always at the same time preparatory for democratic citizenship. It also means that higher education institutions have civic purpose. The economic, social, and civic impacts of colleges and universities are part and parcel of their roles in democratic society.

## What Is Higher Education For? Renewing the Democratic Purposes of Higher Education

Higher education in the United States takes a variety of forms, from selective liberal-arts institutions to community colleges to large research institutions to for-profit firms. The historic roots of each of these subsectors include various forms of democratic intent—multiple paths by which different institutions derive their foundational commitments to the progress of society.

To form an opinion of how higher education is performing, one must first answer the question of what higher education is *for*. The colleges and universities that make up the sector were founded with a dizzying array of purposes—building up local economies, preserving faith-based traditions, producing research necessary for human progress, cultivating able leadership for society, expanding educational opportunity for groups excluded by existing institutions, the list goes on and on. With such a diverse marketplace of nearly 5,000 public and private nonprofit colleges and universities (and thousands more for-profit institutions), finding divided opinion over the sector’s value as a whole should not be surprising.

It also should not be surprising that higher education, with such a diverse array of institutions, is serving more students—and different kinds of students—than at any other point in our nation’s history. Analysis conducted for the U.S. Department of Education in 2015 revealed 74 percent of college students are what was once called “nontraditional”: those who delayed college enrollment, have dependents, attend part time, and/or are fully employed.

There is little debate that the sector has served new populations imperfectly. For example, a low-performing high school student from a high-income family is

still more likely to attend college than a high-performing student from a low-income family, and race remains an important predictor of college enrollment and completion. Yet, whereas 50 years ago American colleges and universities served 7 million students, today they serve nearly 20 million.

Moreover, campuses, once separate and distinct from “outside” communities—protected spaces allowing select students to learn and mature—are more diverse and connected than ever before. Students now face the prospect of testing and exercising their citizenship in the public eye. The role of higher education leadership in these circumstances is uniquely difficult, and fraught. Yet there are encouraging signs of renewed commitment to higher education’s democratic roles.

Several key ideas are reshaping the civic value of the sector.

### Cultivating Engaged Citizens

Throughout the history of American higher education, colleges and universities have been called upon to provide students not only with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the workforce, but also the capacity to contribute to the nation’s civic life. Higher education institutions provide opportunities for students to cultivate civic values such as political participation and community service, which translates to greater civic engagement throughout their lifetimes. College graduates are more likely than their peers to vote, run for public office, and contribute to community-building projects.

Colleges and universities also cultivate public servants. More than 70 percent of all college students report participating in some form of volunteering,



community service, or service learning. These civic behaviors in college have lasting impact—college graduates are more likely to volunteer and serve within their communities.



**Higher education institutions have created programs and plans to increase civic engagement among their student populations. One such plan from the University of Central Florida has set a goal of achieving a 70 percent student voting rate and increasing the number of students participating in community service learning opportunities by 20 percent by the year 2020.**

### Universities as Community Partners

Higher education institutions have immense opportunity to build democracy when they embrace their roles as community partners and generators of applied knowledge. Contrary to the notion that universities are elite “ivory towers,” schools that have made “anchor institution”<sup>i</sup> commitments work to collaborate with the surrounding community around employment, training, local purchasing, infrastructure, and community-identified problems. Campus community engagement centers partner with local governments, businesses, nonprofits, and citizens to maximize collective impact.<sup>ii</sup> In a thriving democracy, individuals rely on the “public store” of knowledge to participate as citizens.<sup>iii</sup> Everyone is a citizen of the community, and universities build democracy when civic practices are

part of the education offered to students in the curriculum and co-curriculum and when these elements are intentionally integrated into how the university participates in the community.



**The growth of the anchor institution movement in recent years has illustrated the variety of ways in which higher education institutions partner with businesses, nonprofit organizations, and neighborhood groups to enhance the communities in which they are located. Rutgers University–Newark has partnered with the City of Newark and local arts organizations to develop new arts facilities and programs to serve Newark residents. Wagner College in New York has deep links to local schools in its Staten Island community, providing students with opportunities to tutor children and promote school success. Alongside many public universities, Paul Quinn College, Unity College, and others operate campus farms that fuse student work and learning with research and public benefit.**

### Connecting Work and Citizenship

A robust understanding of democracy includes citizenship as a means of living rather than isolated volunteerism or participation in elections. Institutions of higher education have great opportunity to further democracy when they help students connect work and professional identity with citizenship. Work serves a public purpose; it is not isolated from society, and it contributes significantly to the construction of community in this country. Connections between what

is learned and practiced in college and what is most valued in the workplace are perhaps most apparent in surveys of employers. Information literacy, ethical reasoning skills, the ability to collaborate as part of a diverse team, a capacity for leadership, and ultimately the ability to generate innovative solutions to complex problems are in high demand in the American workplace, and for good reason. When professionals bring these skills and competencies to bear, the value of their work increases—not independently but in conjunction with that of colleagues. College prepares students for lives of value to those around them, and the workplace provides a good opportunity.



**Millsaps College in Mississippi has created the Institute for Civic and Professional Engagement, which facilitates student development through living and learning communities, in-depth student research projects, study abroad, co-curricular service projects, and professional internships. These experiences help Millsaps students graduate with both a classical education and career goals, civic commitments, and professional skills that equip them for lives of meaning, good citizenship, and leadership.**

### Liberal Arts as the Practice of Freedom

The definition of “liberal” in “liberal-arts education” stems from the Latin word “liberalis,” or freedom. Encompassing a wide range of disciplines, not defined by a standard student experience, liberal-arts education places primary value on freedom of thought, critical analysis, open-mindedness, adaptivity, empathy, and life-long learning so graduates cultivate the habits of mind and practice that contribute to a thriving democracy.

Dialogue is essential for both rigorous scholarship and for a healthy democracy. In a reactive political climate, maintaining spaces where disagreement, constructive conflict, and authentic listening can occur requires sustained effort. There is meaningful opportunity in embracing the capacity for liberal-arts education to help students discover the connections between truth, democracy, and citizenship. By engaging their public purpose as beacons of free inquiry, colleges and universities can also create spaces for dialogue on tough topics, inclusive of broader communities.



**The Democratic Dialogue Project at Colorado College brings together students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives from Colorado College and the United States Airforce Academy. Students come together through shared meals, discussions, and film screenings, with the goal of breaking down misconceptions and building understanding across ideological and experiential differences.<sup>iv</sup> Another format for dialogue is exhibited by Brown University’s Janus Forum Lecture Series, which brings together two scholars with markedly different perspectives on a topic of societal concern.<sup>v</sup> The purpose is not only to present two different viewpoints but also to provide a venue for conversation with campus constituents and members of the general public about a topic of public significance. Both initiatives are examples of how a university is uniquely positioned to convene conversation and bridge divides, modeling dialogue across differences in a public venue.**

### Democratic Public Narrative

Developing the story of an institution's value can include working across campus constituencies to recover, discuss, question, and refresh the “public narrative” of the institution. These narratives often weave together diverse stories of a university's origin, mission, values, and impact on the world. For example, at the University of Virginia, the public narrative is reflected in the campus plan drawn by Thomas Jefferson—a plan that promoted the links between education and the common good.<sup>1</sup> In Kentucky, Berea College recounts a history of serving students from Appalachia, including women and former slaves, with an education fully funded by philanthropy and student work.

The stories communities come to own often plumb institutions' histories as reservoirs of language, illustrating the deep commitment to civic purposes that is typical of American colleges and universities. Such stories remind both internal communities and the wider public of how institutions have pursued democratic purposes throughout their histories—and often elucidate a rewarding path forward.



**At Northern Arizona University, the Lumberjack Leaders Institute is helping the institution expand on its 120-year past as it defines its contemporary role in a state undergoing rapid demographic shifts. The institute is designed to train “first-generation ambassadors” who give back to fellow first-generation students as mentors and guides.**

## The Work Ahead

The honor to serve as a trustee of an American college or university carries with it a fiduciary obligation to guarantee the public purposes of higher education—perhaps first among them the vitality of our democracy. Board members have always been the very leaders of society their students must someday become. Today's trustees are called, as they have been for nearly 400 years, to help the American people achieve their highest potential.

Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely.  
**The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.**

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

Undoubtedly, skeptical voices have influenced the tenor of public debate over the value of American higher education. Notwithstanding the fact that virtually every college or university was founded with an answer to the question of how best to serve the public good, together they have more work to do. The problems the sector is being relied upon to solve are vast and diverse, but every college and university holds a measure of responsibility for the health of our democracy.

Each generation needs to understand and ensure anew the value of its social institutions, including higher education. Despite the challenges facing the sector, colleges and universities are as essential as ever to the strengthening of American democracy.

<sup>1</sup> Importantly, in returning time and again to the high ideals behind a Jeffersonian founding vision, the University of Virginia continues to acknowledge the shortcomings of Thomas Jefferson as a person, particularly his involvement in slavery. Telling the story of an institution's origins can be a powerful force for fulfilling its democratic purpose, but such stories must be genuine to be effective.

## What Should Trustees Do?

- **Learn to tell the story of your institution and its democratic purpose. Work with staff to explore the history of your institution. Seek venues where you can share what you have learned with other community leaders.**
- **Explore your institution’s commitment to diversity and equity. How does inclusive excellence manifest itself on campus—in the curriculum, co-curriculum, and community engagement?**
- **Ask questions about the civic engagement of your student population. What is your institution doing to cultivate engaged citizens, and how might you tell this story to outside groups?**
- **Consider your own experience as a citizen-professional. How have you integrated your professional work with your role as a citizen? Share your experience with students, faculty, and fellow board members.**
- **What policies does your institution have in place to encourage civil conversations on campus and beyond? Does your board discuss such issues as part of its governance duties? Does your board engage in such conversations with other members of the campus community?**
- **Is your institution a “steward of its place”? Are your policies related to purchasing, real estate, workforce development, and community engagement viewed as serving the well-being of the wider community?**

## Further Reading

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## Additional Examples of Higher Education Building Healthy Democracy

### A public narrative: Augsburg University as a 21st-century urban settlement

An example of finding in its history a democratic impulse is the way in which Augsburg University, located in a diverse immigrant neighborhood in Minneapolis, has captured the themes of the late 19th- and early 20th-century settlement house tradition. Augsburg has settled in its urban neighborhood for 150 years, walking alongside its diverse neighbors and illustrating what it means to be “of the city” rather than simply “in the city.” See “Vocation and Location: The Saga of Augsburg College as Urban Settlement,” [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article\\_id=3774](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article_id=3774).

### Inclusive excellence: Redefining what it means to succeed

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has published a campus self-study guide aimed at helping institutions explore how to promote wider access to higher education and build a more equitable approach to the student experience in classrooms and on campus. At the heart of this effort is a commitment to “inclusive excellence.” See <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/CommittingtoEquityInclusiveExcellence.pdf>.

### Citizen professionals: Restoring the links between work and citizenship

The Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota has done pioneering work on the concept of citizen professionals. Understanding oneself as a citizen-professional is claiming an identity that is defined by more than one’s work. It also assumes a wider body of knowledge, looking beyond technical expertise to embrace cultural and civic forms of knowing. Finally, it is grounded in a set of skills that include building relationships, mapping power, and engaging communities in change processes. See <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/research/cpc/idea.asp>.

### College campuses as contexts for healthy dialogue and living

At Denison University in Ohio, the residence life program is organized around the concept of free and public spaces, encouraging students to embrace the fact that the Latin root of “conversation” means both to talk together and to live together. Residence halls become contexts for learning about diverse life experiences, opinions, and aspirations. Denison President Adam Weinberg explains the model at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/adam-weinberg/getting-the-most-from-a-liberal-arts-college\\_b\\_7946678.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/adam-weinberg/getting-the-most-from-a-liberal-arts-college_b_7946678.html).

### Anchors of neighborhoods: The myriad roles of colleges and universities in community

The Anchor Institution Task Force (AITF) convenes a diverse mix of anchor institutions, including colleges and universities, hospitals, local and regional governments, and cultural institutions. Based on the principle that these various institutions come to the table with other community partners, state their self-interests, and seek shared value in areas such as employment, purchasing, and real estate, the AITF promotes best practices for its member institutions seeking to engage and support the wider community. See <https://www.margainc.com/aitf/>.

## Endnotes

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- iii Harry C. Boyte. *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap*. (Dayton: The Kettering Foundation, 2013), 23. Accessed July 10, 2018. <https://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/reinventing-citizenship-public-work-citizen-centered-democracy-and-empowerment-gap-0>.
- iv K. Elizabeth Coggins and Gregory Laski. "The Power of Dialogue." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 24, 2017. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Power-of-Dialogue/241272>.
- v "Janus Forum Lecture Series." Brown University. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/political-theory-project/janus>.

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