

HIGHER EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

by Woodruff D. Smith



Public higher education is in crisis in the United States. The crisis may appear to be a fiscal one, as one state after another drastically reduces its support for public colleges and universities in response to lowered tax revenues and an economic downturn. But fiscal crises come and go. If this were all there were to it, we could expect things to improve with general economic recovery. But, in reality, the decline of state support for public higher education has been going on for some time—good economic times or bad. That so many states, when faced with financial problems, make higher education one of their first budget-cutting candidates speaks to the existence of something more complex than cash flow.

I suggest that the academy's ongoing, currently heightened, financial difficulties are a manifestation of a much more serious and complicated set of problems, the most fundamental being the decline of the public sphere in American life. This decline has been accompanied by a lowering of regard for the institutions that have been most significant in creating

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and maintaining the public sphere. Of these, none are more prominent than the nation's public colleges and universities.

Most of the factors contributing to the decline of the public sphere, we in the academic profession can do only a little about. But one important cause of decline is within our power to correct: the failure of faculty and administrators to orient a substantial portion of the curricular, research, and service activities of their institutions around maintaining the public sphere.

To gain public support, we must insist on the academy's importance

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to a democratic society—rather than on the importance of the academy's own values, values that are increasingly seen outside universities as having been constructed by and for the advantage of academics.

We must make it clear that a healthy, dynamic public sphere is essential to the well-being of the nation and that public higher education is essential to the well-being of the American public sphere.

What is the "public sphere?" We should begin with what it is not. It does not denote vaguely defined affective features of social life such as "public spirit," "patriotism," or even "citizenship" unless the last is used to refer to how to act effectively in the public life of society. Still less does the term mean a category of state agencies set off from a putative "private sphere" on the basis of funding through taxation and performance of governmental functions.

Although the idea of the public sphere bears some similarities to "civil society," the two notions are fundamentally different. "Civil society" implies a qualitative separation and a hierarchy of significance between, on the one hand, private interests that constitute civil society proper and the realm of the state and politics on the other. In a modern democracy, it is difficult to draw clear lines between what is and is not the "state," between the political and the nonpolitical. Moreover, thinking in terms of "civil society" can obscure a process vital to a modern society, in which political and social consensus, and thus options for state policy, are established through open, continuous, and informed conversation among the largest possible number of people—including people actively engaged in politics and government.

Jürgen Habermas introduced the modern usage of the term "public sphere" in 1962 to describe a range of historical phenomena that he associated with the formation of bourgeois society and of liberalism in the

18th century. The public sphere was the realm of social existence that connected society and the state, the structure within which public opinion formed and which was at the core of what 18th- and 19th-century liberals meant by “the public.” Public opinion and public interest were supposed to be the basis of legislation in a liberal state and the criteria for judging state policies.¹

The public sphere, according to Habermas, was a product of a particular phase in the development of bourgeois society. It appeared in informal institutions such as coffeehouses in the 17th and 18th centuries, reached its classical form in the latter century when it was incorporated into liberal political theory, and declined thereafter as capitalism became more centrally organized, as the conduct of politics became more specialized and bureaucratized, and as rational public opinion was transformed by advertising and the popular press into forms of mass behavior guided by popular media.

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Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere has been superseded in recent years by versions that are less structural and more fully articulated in cultural terms.² The public sphere can now be seen as something that, rather than passing out of effective existence in the nineteenth century, has changed through adapting to new circumstances. One of the most important instruments of adaptation, especially in America, has been the university. To understand how universities have played this role, it is useful to envision the central feature of the public sphere as a discursive construct, as an immense, ongoing set of open conversations carried on through a variety of media, rather than a “structure” in Habermas’s sense. The conversations are purposeful. They articulate issues that may be of significant concern to many or all members of the public, lead to the formulation of options for collective action, and identify consensus about matters of judgment in community affairs. That is, they create public opinion. The public sphere not only informs political discussion and, to some degree, legitimates modern political systems, but it also brings together information and ideas from all other areas of life which have public implications, or where interests reside that require some form of public action. The conversations of the public sphere determine the effective meanings of words and concepts in contemporary culture.

One of the major functions of universities throughout the world since

the early 19th century has been to provide an institutional framework for the conversations that comprise the public sphere, and to train people to take part in them. To a considerable extent, the series of educational reforms initiated in Germany early in the 19th century that produced the model of the modern university were intended to strengthen and institutionalize the public sphere.³

For example, the emphasis that reformers such as Wilhelm von Humboldt placed on research in the new curriculum was not primarily intended to increase human knowledge. This was to be a secondary benefit. The main aim was to develop in students, under the guidance of a researching faculty, the skills required for open, critical inquiry that von Humboldt perceived as being necessary for public life—for participation in the public sphere. The results of even esoteric academic research, whether by students or by professors, were to be offered for public discussion through publication and, if they survived critical scrutiny, to become part of the public conversation. The institution of tenure as we understand it derived from the reformers' insistence that state officials—in their view, the intellectual elite that the educational reforms were to produce—should participate in the public sphere and should be protected against repercussions from such participation. Thus, it was in their capacities as public officials that professors in 19th century German universities obtained tenure.

When the German university system was adapted to American needs,



the tenure system was eventually copied as well—but not for the civil service in general, as in Germany, but specifically for university faculty. Tenure was adopted in the U.S. for the same reason it was originally established in Germany: to allow professors to participate in public discussion without excessive fear of reprisal.

An important feature of the European 18th and 19th-century public sphere was that although it was closely connected with liberalism, it was not inherently democratic. The people who participated in the conversations of the public sphere were expected to be an elite of intelligence and education in an era when education was mainly available to the relatively few who could afford it. The elite's intelligence was to be sharpened and its education completed in universities. Even in the less-structured versions of the public sphere that had developed in the coffeehouses of the 18th century, it had been

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expected that only people who could be regarded by others like themselves as having something to say and the ability to say it convincingly should be listened to.⁴ One objection many nineteenth-century liberals had to democracy was that it would, by enfranchising the uneducated, the non-select, lower the quality of public discourse to the point of triviality and pave the way to a tyranny led by people with the power and the money to shape the attitudes of the “masses.”

Democracy emerged in Europe anyway in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. How, liberals asked, could the public sphere, which was necessary for the effective running of politics and society, be reconciled to democracy? In most countries in Western Europe, the answer was use the educational system to select an elite of intelligence from as wide a social base as possible, and train the elite both for participation in the public sphere and to act as the main pool from which aspirants for the higher state and business bureaucracies would be drawn. This was the guiding intention behind much of educational reform in Western Europe during the first two-thirds of the 20th century.⁵ Universities, through their curricula and through peripheral non-academic activities that constituted an apprenticeship in public participation, would train the future members of the public sphere.

Having had a longer experience of democracy at the national level than Europeans, Americans were not, on the whole, as worried at any

point in the 19th century about the “degrading” of public discourse by the “masses.” Nevertheless, it was a constant concern of leaders and educated people that the public sphere—the public discussions about important matters conducted with appropriate knowledge by competent persons—was too narrowly-based, too limited, too provincial, and that as the United States modernized, it would be necessary to protect and improve the quality of the public conversation. It would also be necessary to provide a larger number of educated people to operate new and

increasingly complex institutions of government and business.

As in Europe, this need was met through educational reform. European models were followed up to a point.⁶ At the level of higher education, certain colleges adopted something like German university arrangements and combined them with elements from earlier American traditions of colleges for the social elite. In the 20th century, some developments in American higher education paralleled contemporary European efforts

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to select and educate an intellectual elite in prestigious schools: for example, the partial conversion of the Ivy League colleges into meritocratic institutions and the creation of the S.A.T.. But these were epiphenomena, conceived within a larger framework that was profoundly different from the one that existed in Europe. This larger framework centered around, and was to a very large extent the product of, this nation’s public universities.

In the latter part of the 19th century, it was decided in most places that the state needed to undertake the expense of supporting colleges and universities. In part, this was an attempt to make sure that technically-trained personnel were available for industry, agriculture, and the schools, but that was neither the only nor the main reason. Technical training schools without university-type structure or aspirations would have been equally effective and cheaper.

The primary reason for the development of the public university was to prepare a substantial segment of the citizen body to engage in public discourse—to take a useful part in the exchange of ideas necessary for the effective operation of society and the political system. No one intended that everyone should attend public colleges and universities, just those able and willing to undergo the kind of education available there. But the graduates were not supposed to constitute an elite, at least not in the

European sense. Instead, they were to become the core of the active, engaged citizenry—a “middle class,” perhaps, in terms of the occupations they could be expected to follow, but drawn from the full range of income groups in the United States.

The curricula at the public colleges and universities emphasized a balance between specific knowledge and the more general knowledge and skills important for participation in public affairs—not only for leaders or even for voters, but also for contributors to the formation of public opinion and public consensus.⁷

This intention to train people for the public sphere underlay many of the most distinctive characteristics of American public higher education: the balancing of studies toward an undergraduate major with general education studies, the establishment of a system of credits for specific courses that facilitated transfer among institutions and fulfillment of the aims of the curriculum, the designation of the baccalaureate degree as a prerequisite

for study in some of the most prestigious professional fields, and so forth.

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Not all of the initiatives that created the characteristic forms of American higher education arose in the public universities, but regardless of where they originated, their adoption by the public institutions guaranteed their permanence. Why? Because the public colleges and universities were immensely successful. As time went on, the number of students they educated came to dwarf the number in private institutions, thus making it difficult for most private colleges to exist unless their curricula allowed for convenient transfer to and from the public universities.

The result, in the long run, was that a very large proportion of the American public received a college education. Whether or not this circumstance created the most sophisticated public sphere imaginable can be debated. Probably it did not. But it created a large segment of society able to participate in various ways in the public conversation with some knowledge and skills in fields other than technical or specialized ones.

In essence, what the United States did—largely through the instrument of public higher education, with the necessary support of the public high schools—was to democratize the public sphere, not totally, but to a much greater extent than anyone would earlier have thought possible. It was a remarkable accomplishment, and it has fundamentally shaped American society.

Universities and colleges, again with public institutions acting as the determinative if not always the originating factor, helped give form to the American public sphere in other ways. Because the number of potential contributions to public discourse is so large, participants in the conversations of the public sphere—especially the reading public—require signs that can be readily employed to identify people who are most likely to offer something worthwhile.

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In the United States, among the most important signs are the possession of academic qualifications relevant to what is being discussed and faculty status in an appropriate field. Public conversation in the United States is not monopolized by universities, but universities, through their certifying function performed by the degrees they grant and the academic status they assign, clearly affect public discourse to a very large extent—probably more than in most European countries. This is a direct

consequence of the huge extent of higher education in America, which is itself largely a product of the public universities.

In essence, higher education institutions subsidize a large part of the public sphere through paying the salaries of their faculties, providing for the training of potential new faculty members, and shouldering the costs of information exchange in the more esoteric regions of the public sphere by supporting journals and research and through library purchases of journal subscriptions and scholarly books. These media may not supply the larger public directly with ideas and information, but they are the sources from which new ideas are taken for public presentation.

Another vital way in which institutions of higher education have supported and shaped the public sphere in America has been by providing place and opportunity for the conduct of public conversation on a more personal basis than is possible in print, and at greater depth than is possible in most broadcast venues. The most obvious forms for this support are institutionally sponsored speeches, conferences, colloquia, debates, and the like. Probably more important are the discussions that take place in classrooms, in which thousands upon thousands of instructors and students have the opportunity—if they give it to themselves—to think through critical issues, to ponder out loud the implications of statements, to respond to criticism, and to be made aware of the weaknesses of their own thinking. Such discussions can and do take place anywhere, but in

the United States, the large majority of them occur in college classrooms.

It would be possible to go on at considerable length along these lines, but the general point would be the same: Universities and colleges are peculiarly important in constituting, shaping, and maintaining the American public sphere, and they play this role to a large extent because of the existence of public institutions of higher education. For better or worse—mostly for better—American public higher education, the American public sphere, and American democracy are closely linked. They rise and fall together.

At the present time, they are falling—the first and second obviously, the third by implication. If an illustration is desired, the course of public discussion and national policymaking since September 2001 could stand by itself: the muted responses of the universities—especially the public ones—to the readily apparent need for thorough discussion of all issues; the incredibly narrow and

often puerile character of much of the public conversation that has taken place outside the universities; and the ready agreement of the bulk of elected officials to the establishment of partial autocracy on the flimsiest of grounds.

It is not that discussion has not occurred, or that institutions of higher education have not made some effort to promote such discussion, but colleges and universities have felt heavily constrained to keep what they do within tight limits. They have acted timidly for fear that legislatures will cut their budgets further, that donors will reduce their support, and that self-appointed guardians of the “truth” will damage them by publicizing the names of faculty members who even suggest that there may be more than one position worthy of consideration.

Just at the moment when a comprehensive, critical public discussion is absolutely necessary in order for the right decisions to be made, just when the entire world is depending on the effective operation of the public sphere in the United States, that public sphere appears to be on holiday. Without major engagement by and within the colleges and universities, the rest of the public sphere either discourses in the language of triviality or fragments into small, ideologically-defined factions whose members talk mainly to each other. The portion of the public whose higher education is supposed to have prepared them to discuss important issues in depth seems content to accept, uncritically, the array of inanities,

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patent fabrications, and simplistic formulas that fills most of the media.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the media: the concentration of ownership of newspapers; the existence of a television journalism that must shape itself to the interests and prejudices of advertisers and to the lowest common denominator of its viewers' understanding; the dependence of all media on organized, official sources for news; and so forth. But the media are not in themselves the heart of the problem.

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What we have been seeing is a decaying concept of the nature and value of the public aspect of American life and the declining competence of the people who should be participating in the public conversation. As a general phenomenon, there is nothing mysterious about this. The public sphere is not something that must necessarily exist in a permanent, unchanging form. It must, as it has for the past two or three centuries, be regularly reconstituted and constantly reinforced, and

it is not surprising that at times—unfortunately, often at critical times—its weaknesses become apparent.

Because of their peculiar historical role in framing and supporting the public sphere in the United States, public colleges and universities must lead the effort to correct these weaknesses. Indeed, their survival as institutions enjoying significant state support may depend on how seriously they accept the task and how well they accomplish it. The degradation of public engagement brings with it the dissipation of the primary reason for the existence of public higher education: to create a context for such engagement and to educate people to engage competently. Only if Americans fully understand how profoundly important the public sphere is will there be a chance of arresting the slide in support for public higher education and avoiding the conversion of public institutions into private ones in all but name.

What should we do? At the most general level, we must explore, discuss, and publicize the concept of the public sphere as a necessary element of an effective, dynamic modern society. We should avoid approaches to understanding the public sphere that contribute to its decline—approaches that, for example, treat public engagement largely as a matter of expressing belief, loyalty, passion, or acceptable attitudes. Instead, we should engage in reasoned discourse with the objective of creating options for action. There is nothing inherently wrong with belief,

passion, and loyalty, but for the public sphere to perform its tasks, it must encourage and support competent, rational conversation.

This requires not just an attitude of tolerance toward a wide range of views and a willingness to try to understand them, but also knowledge and skill in discussion and in critical thinking. Public discourse should center not around the avowal of loyalties and convictions, but around exploring possibilities and implications. We should also avoid the tendency to dissolve public life conceptually into an array of private interests, a tendency that, to a considerable extent, the discourse of “civil society” legitimates and promotes.

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In these and other general ways, we in higher education can join with others to encourage a revival of the public sphere. But there are additional tasks much more specific to public colleges and universities to which we should address ourselves vigorously. We should insist on the fundamental connection between public higher education and a

healthy public sphere—emphasizing this connection in our dealings with those who authorize our budgets, those from whom we seek private funding, those whom we are inviting to become our student, and with citizens in general.

We should not neglect to show that public higher education has a major, vital responsibility to conduct research in support of the economy and to provide an educated workforce, but we should make clear that these are not our primary functions. Much of the weakness in our performance of our public role in recent years has arisen from our having forgotten this and allowed short-term fiscal considerations to shape our self-presentation and our priorities, and we have done this to our long-term detriment—fiscal and otherwise.

The economy doesn't need public institutions of higher education. Private institutions, perhaps partly subsidized by the state, can support the economy just as well. What private institutions cannot do is to maintain for very long an active public sphere in a democratic framework.

Without the competition of a large and excellent array of public colleges and universities emphasizing education for broad public participation and support of public life, most private institutions would have to tailor themselves to the narrower needs of those who support them: elite groups—however well-intentioned they may be—and economic interests.

We should also acknowledge that we in higher education have failed

to live up to our public obligations. The performance of the American public sphere during the past year or two is evidence that we have not produced in our graduates the full range of intellectual capabilities and have not provided them with the kinds of knowledge needed to deal competently with current issues.

We in public higher education should rethink our priorities and emphasize the primacy of our responsibility for the public sphere. We should adjust our curricula to focus on preparing students for public participation, and to the greatest extent possible we should try to orient our research toward matters significant for public conversation.

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At the very least, we should avoid the tendency common in some academic departments to devalue the work of scholars who address a broad public audience and to denigrate “applied” as opposed to “pure” research. The very distinction is often a false one. Its currency displays a self-referential system of values in

academia that reduces our effectiveness in the public sphere and increasingly makes us seem irrelevant to any concerns but our own.

We should stop viewing undergraduate general education as a Cook’s tour of the varieties of our own endeavors—six hours of humanities, six hours of science, and so forth—and focus instead on encouraging students to assemble the knowledge necessary to understand contemporary public discourse and the intellectual flexibility necessary to participate in it. (Serious historical inquiry, for example, especially in an interdisciplinary framework, is one of the most effective preparations for activity in the public sphere.)

We should also rethink also some of the assumptions we make about our relationships to our students. Are we essentially employees of firms supplying customers with something they want—knowledge, a “well-rounded” intellectual character, certification as an educated person, a ticket to a career? To a considerable extent we are, but, especially in public institutions, that is not our main mission.

Our primary obligation is to supply the public with thinking citizens and capable participants, at the same time that we are giving individuals what they want. If this were not the case, there would be no reason for public, as opposed to private, colleges and universities. Are we agencies for instilling certain attitudes in our students—for example, acceptance of the duties of citizenship or appreciation of cultural diversity? Of course

we are, but again, our primary duty to the public requires that even these attitudes be presented as matters to be critically examined, as subjects of reasonable discussion that are filled with ambiguities that we must collectively try to sort out. Higher education for the public sphere cannot be indoctrination.

These are some of the questions that we should be asking as we examine our own part in strengthening both public higher education and the public sphere in the United States. Much of value in American life will be greatly affected by the examination—perhaps even American democracy itself.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1989; orig. German ed. 1962).
- ² See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992.)
- ³ Charles E. McClelland, *State, Society, and University in Germany, 1700-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 101-49.
- ⁴ Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 154-57.
- ⁵ Fritz K. Ringer, *Education and Society in Modern Europe* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979); John E. Talbott, *The Politics of Educational Reform in France 1918-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).
- ⁶ Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 57-120.
- ⁷ Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978), 99-150.

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