

AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: RESCUING DEMOCRACY'S PURPOSE AND POLICIES¹

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On 29 April 2009, ministers from the then 46 countries of the Bologna Process affirmed that colleges and universities should “have the resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes such as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation” (Bologna Process 2009, para. 4).

Today, as a pandemic sweeps across the globe, democracy itself is under siege. Citizens in all countries must rally to ensure its survival, vitality, justice, and capacity to solve society’s urgent and often tragic problems. As cultural anthropologist Morgan Liu wrote: “Democracy simply does not make sense to many people in the world today. For those living outside of north Atlantic countries, there appears to be a limit to what a democratic political system can accomplish in addressing their societies’ deepest problems, founded on systemic inequality and injustice” (Liu 2017).

Higher education cannot alone rebuild citizens’ broken faith in the promise of democracy. But – in partnership with the wider community – it has a critical role to play.

We know from decades of deep experience that solutions to big challenges always are enacted in particular societal contexts. Accordingly, while we embrace the “larger goal” of renewing democracy addressed in this book, we explore the meaning of that goal in the arena we know best: U.S. democracy and American higher education.

In the United States, no problem is more urgent than closing the historic race, class and income divides that have engendered suspicion, fear, violence and even a presidency marked by deliberate fomenting of racial, ethnic and cross-border hostility. U.S. disparities were deepened by the pandemic but long pre-dated it. Further, U.S. students and their families are burdened with more than \$1.5 trillion in college debt (Looney *et al.* 2020), and with millions reeling from a battered economy, most Americans are struggling to find everyday solutions to the many challenges they face. We see a growing danger: can the U.S. uphold a sacred element central to its historic vision and values as a democratic society where everyone with ability and drive can prosper, not only those with privilege?

Collectively, these issues have become what we call “fierce urgencies” for U.S. democracy. This chapter explores the role U.S. higher education should play in building new capacity to solve these “fierce urgencies” and create a more just, inclusive and globally responsible democracy.

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In this U.S. context, we see two overarching higher education pathways for rescuing and re-engaging with democracy’s fundamental purpose — creating a society in which all are respected, all have access to political and social power and citizens themselves provide guidance on key issues to their legally elected governments.

Pathway 1: The College Promise Movement: Making college² universal, freely available and affordable for all who seek it, not just those who can afford it, and

Pathway 2: The Democracy Learning Movement: Providing all learners with a robust, civic-enabling and problem-engaged postsecondary education.

Each of these pathways has gained widespread reach and momentum. The College Promise movement has been embraced in many communities and states and has made its way into pending federal legislation (U.S. House of Representatives 2019). Democracy Learning is our simplified title for a broad array of civic-enabling educational reforms that also are moving forward.

Connecting the Pathways: Educators and policy leaders should work to align and interconnect College Promise and Democracy Learning. In what follows, we describe defining themes in each movement. We then propose near-term and longer-term initiatives to bring these two movements together as dynamic and mutually reinforcing catalysts for democratic rescue and renewal.

Pathway 1: The College Promise Movement: Making college universal, freely available, and affordable for all

Building cohesive, inclusive communities that ensure a quality education for all, from birth through college and life, should be a top priority for every democratic country. Yet, the exponential growth of the rich, at the expense of millions in poverty, has left large swaths of the country impoverished, drastically undereducated, and isolated in what are frequently referred to as America’s education deserts. Further, 99 per cent of new U.S. jobs will require an education beyond high school. Yet labour economist Anthony Carnevale and colleagues report that the U.S. has not supplied the talent pipeline prepared for America’s workforce: on average only half of U.S. undergraduates complete their tertiary studies in 6 years or less (Carnevale *et al.* 2016). The U.S. has a long road ahead to build equitable access to quality college learning for all.

But even as the federal government stalls on making college affordable and equitable, many U.S. communities and states are pointing the way towards new solutions. Today, the College Promise movement, often referred to as “free college,” is rapidly gaining ground, especially for students and communities that have long seen higher education as unattainable (Millett *et al.* 2020).

Until World War II, U.S. colleges served only a privileged minority. In 1940, only 4.6 per cent of Americans had earned a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).

² College in the U.S. is generally referred to as postsecondary education beyond high school, including two years at an American community college and/or up to four years at an American college or university. College in the U.S. is not the institution UK students may attend to prepare for university exams.

With the 1944 passage of the GI Bill (U.S. Department of Defense 2019), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the authorisation and subsequent reauthorisations of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA, Public Law 89-329), the U.S. made valiant efforts "to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education" (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers 2020).

Nonetheless, college completion today remains highly stratified by race and income, with many students of colour and low-income learners remaining far behind their peers in degree attainment. (Ma *et al.* 2019). Responding to this problem, a unique grassroots solution has emerged: the College Promise movement.

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama set a North Star goal³ for the nation to have "the best educated, most competitive workforce by the year 2020" (The White House 2009). In 2015, President Obama announced America's College Promise to make the first two years of college free for students attending an American community college (The White House 2015), followed by legislation to enact his proposal (Baldwin *et al.* 2015).

A divided government halted federal-level progress toward this College Promise goal. But communities and states moved forward to tackle the problem of putting college within reach. The College Promise Campaign, a new non-profit, nonpartisan organisation outside of the federal government, was established and led by Dr. Jill Biden, then Second Lady of the U.S. and Northern Virginia Community College professor, and the Honourable James Geringer, former Governor of Wyoming, who led his state to ensure sustainable 'promise' scholarship funding (College Promise 2016).

At that time, fifty-three communities had already launched College Promise programmes to give hardworking students Promise scholarships, mentors, and community service opportunities to pursue higher education (College Promise 2016). In 2014, Governor William Haslam put the Tennessee Promise in place, providing a national example for state-wide action (College Promise 2016: 6).

As often happens in the U.S., a diversity of programmes grew exponentially over the next five years. College Promise, the Washington, DC organisation that serves as the national clearinghouse and systems integrator for these programmes, now supports 326 Promise programmes in 47 states, and 29 state-wide Promise programmes (College Promise 2019).

While there is no standard Promise, just as there is no standard U.S. college or university, all share common goals and features. To put a College Promise in place, an institution, community, and/or state adopts a public assurance (e.g., legislation, executive order, local policy or regulation) to make one to four years of college tuition-free for every eligible student advancing on the path to earn a college degree, a certificate and/or credits that transfer to a four-year university (College Promise 2019: 5).

³ A big, lofty goal that requires great collective efforts.

Beyond tuition, many College Promise programmes fund college fees and provide increased student support (e.g. mentors, advisors, community service and internship opportunities), making the first two or more years of college – at a minimum – as universal, free and accessible as public high school. Most students meet a minimum Grade Point Average, complete an application for federal and state scholarship aid and remain in good standing each year while receiving Promise funds.

The majority of College Promise programmes share these characteristics:

- Place-based: A College, City, Region, or State,
- Guaranteed Financial Support for College,
- Wrap-Around Student Supports,
- Evidence & Performance-Based,
- Financially Sustainable,
- Cross-sector, Sustainable Leadership (Kanter 2019).

Led in many regions by America’s colleges and universities in partnership with community leaders, residents and public and private organisations, the College Promise movement criss-crosses U.S. cities and towns from West to East and from North to South (Miller-Adams 2019).

Today, the grassroots College Promise movement is ripe and ready for national policy leadership, girded with a wealth of research and policies to make its case for greater impact. Bipartisan leaders have recently proposed a federal-state partnership (Hoagland *et al.* 2020) to build a better educated, workforce-prepared America and to help reduce historical education inequality and inequities.

Pathway 2: The Democracy Learning Movement: Providing all learners with a robust, civic-enabling and problem-engaged postsecondary education.

Making college affordable is necessary but insufficient for building U.S. capacity to tackle democracy’s “fierce urgencies.” It is by no means a given that merely completing a U.S. college degree (even with College Promise supports) will in fact result in a generation ready to help create solutions to democracy’s difficult and long-entrenched disparities (Finley 2012). Many students choose programmes of study that devote no time at all to any aspect of democracy inquiry, whether in the U.S. context or in the larger context of global interdependence.

Indeed, in a series of 2004 focus groups conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), college students and college-bound students ranked civic learning as one of their lowest priorities for higher education (Hart Research 2004). Multiple surveys by the Annenberg Public Policy Center are consistent with these findings (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2019). In a recent analysis of needed college learning, former Harvard President Derek Bok synthesized a wealth of evidence showing young Americans’—including college educated Americans’—political disengagement and even cynicism (Bok 2020: 23-24).

Most students' primary goal for college-going is gaining access to good jobs. But it should not be an either/or choice between career preparation on the one hand or education for democracy learning and engagement on the other.

As the leading American scholar of the connections between education and employment has found, the best preparation for career success combines broad general education (i.e. study across multiple disciplines) with specialised learning, not specialisation alone (Carnevale *et al.* 2020: 3). Broad multidisciplinary learning, as we explain below, also is a key to the democracy preparation and learning that students should acquire in college.

To play its part in the renewal of U.S. democracy, American higher education needs to ensure that democracy-engaged studies become a core component of all students' college learning, rather than an option that many students readily avoid. The democracy learning we envision engages students directly with issues of democracy's principles and practices, with some of the "fierce urgencies" Americans face as a multicultural society riven by deep inequities, and with active experience in the hard work of collaborative civic problem-solving.

This may seem a large agenda, but in fact, work on making democracy learning expected rather than optional in higher education already has begun (Schneider 2017).

In what follows, we briefly review the resources the United States already has in hand for providing every college student with robust preparation for civic inquiry and democratic engagement. We then propose near-term and longer-term efforts to bring the College Promise and Democracy Learning movements together.

Resources in hand for a rededication to democracy learning:

U.S. higher education's deep-rooted commitments to civic mission, including:

- A founding affirmation — promoted since the first decades of the U.S Republic — of the integral connections between higher education and the leadership needed to sustain a self-governing democracy.
- A long history of re-affirming those integral connections at pivotal turning points in U.S. history (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). To illustrate: after the searing destruction of World War II, President Truman's 1947 Commission on Higher Education issued a six-volume report which affirmed "a fuller realisation of democracy" and the building of international cooperation as higher education's highest goals (President's Commission on Higher Education 1947: Vol 1:6).

U.S. higher education's pervasive embrace of general education requirements intended — at least in theory — to provide the broad learning needed for informed citizenship:

- U.S. higher education has long required general education studies to provide the big picture knowledge — of science, history, humanities, arts, social systems and global

interdependence — that citizens need. The Truman Commission reaffirmed general education as the locus for democracy learning.

- In 2020, the seven major U.S. accrediting associations for colleges, community colleges, and universities include a purposeful general education programme in their required standards for quality learning. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions 2016). Accreditation is mandatory for access to federal funding.

A twenty-first century do-over for general education now in the making and potentially poised for new democracy learning focus:

- A twenty-first century redesign of general education is underway across many colleges and universities (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015; Hart Research Associates 2016) and even in entire state systems of public universities such as the University System of Georgia (University System of Georgia 2019).
- The new designs typically emphasise 1) 21st century skills such as evidence-based analysis that are crucial to democratic problem-solving (as well as career success); 2) “thematic pathways” that feature cross-disciplinary examination of crucial societal questions such as race and health or global warming; and 3) “learning by doing” including service learning, community-based projects and other strategies for connecting knowledge to real-world problems (Wilson *et al.* 2017, Schneider 2017 and 2020).
- If deliberately connected to civic engagement and democracy’s “fierce urgencies”, these general education redesigns are poised to update and revitalise the civic purposes long claimed as a primary rationale for U.S. general education requirements.

Racial, ethnic, labour and social justice scholars and programmes well established across U.S. higher education and in general education requirements:

- Since the 1960s, creative scholars and activists have established new fields of study to explore different groups’ struggles for societal power and justice and to probe the deep fissures — such as structural racism and xenophobia or the failure to provide workers with a living wage — that still impede societal efforts to create a fully inclusive multicultural democracy. These “new academy” programmes have pioneered civic problem-solving partnerships with the wider community. Undergraduate students engaged in these programmes help co-create solutions to a wide range of “fierce urgencies” (Minnich 1995).
- Early on, social justice educators recognised general education as a way to engage educated Americans with democracy’s ongoing quests for inclusion and justice. By 2015, the majority of U.S. higher education institutions already required some version of diversity studies — often in general education (Hart Research Associates 2016).
- In July 2020 the nation’s largest public higher education system, the California State University (CSU), added an ethnic studies/social justice requirement to its general

education requirements (Los Angeles Times 2020). Diversity requirements established elsewhere in earlier eras will likely be updated soon to deal with Americans’ “racial reckoning” and the nation’s unfolding history as a multi-racial democracy in which white people no longer are a majority.

A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future: a twenty-first century framework for democracy learning developed and endorsed by civic-minded educators across the U.S.

- Federally commissioned and widely influential, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (2012) called for civic learning in school and college to become expected rather than optional and provided a civic learning framework covering Civic Knowledge, Civic Skills, Civic Values, and direct participation—i.e., learning by doing—in Collective Civic Problem-Solving (See Appendix for Framework).
- Concurrent with *A Crucible Moment’s* release, a dozen major higher education organisations joined forces as the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement network (CLDE)⁴ to help advance the key recommendations in the report (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2020).
- Collectively CLDE members already have developed civic learning curricula and co-curricula - in general education and many college majors - for community colleges, public and private colleges and universities and students from low-income communities. Many also have worked on advancing civic problem-solving partnerships between higher education and communities (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2020).

This list is necessarily abbreviated but our core point is simple. U.S. higher education already is poised to help repair and renew U.S. democracy by braiding democracy learning, including engagement with myriad “fierce urgencies,” directly into the fabric of college degrees. Higher education’s impact would be strengthened if the College Promise movement and the Democracy Learning movements make common cause.

Connecting the Pathways

Bring College Promise and Democracy Learning pathways together—to increase societal equity and fuel civic problem solving

Efforts to make higher education more equitably affordable have found a national megaphone. “Free College” became a rallying cry in the 2020 political campaigns, with media and students themselves further amplifying the call. America’s College Promise legislation (U.S. House of Representatives 2019) was re-introduced in 2019 for a federal-state partnership with federal funding creating incentives for states to enact their own Promise reforms.

⁴ <https://www.aacu.org/crucible/action-network>, accessed 19 August 2020.

As this legislation is considered, our top recommendation is that higher education leaders take bold steps to bring College Promise and Democracy Learning reforms together. We propose a new determination that everyone who benefits from College Promise support should devote part of their studies to democracy learning and civic problem solving.

In the near term, we ask educators and community partners promoting College Promise programmes to incorporate specific Democracy Learning expectations to their criteria for College Promise support.

As explained above, general education is already a requirement in most accredited two- and four-year institutions⁵. Aligning with this well-established U.S. educational practice, College Promise programmes can stipulate that, in meeting their institution’s general education requirements, students should complete courses that engage them with:

- 1) the workings and future of U.S. democracy, including the ongoing efforts to create a more just and inclusive society;
- 2) world cultures and global interdependence; and
- 3) a significant experience in “learning by doing” in partnership with an agency or organisation working to solve significant public problems.

Options for meeting these expectations are already available at virtually every two-and four-year institution. Advisors can help Promise students find them.

Some College Promise programmes already require students to engage in public service. But to our knowledge, none has yet asked College Promise beneficiaries to combine public service with intentional study concerning democracy’s future in the U.S. and abroad, or with active work on the “fierce urgencies” now roiling democracy both at home and in the wider world. The U.S. can rededicate itself to its founding principles by asking students themselves to explore their meaning, application, and future.

For the longer term, a more ambitious and ongoing alignment of College Promise and Democracy Learning reforms is needed.

While higher education is in the midst of curriculum pathway redesigns, as discussed above, the reforms are moving forward too slowly and too unevenly. Concerted and ongoing leadership is needed to dramatically accelerate the pace and reach of these educational redesigns.

Concurrently, many policy leaders have already recognised the need for new funding models for U.S. higher education. The pandemic, which has plunged both public and private higher education into fiscal crisis, now makes financing redesigns an immediate priority.

It is critical that financing redesign move forward in tandem with the on-going curriculum pathway redesign. The last thing the U.S. needs are new financial models for an old, outdated,

⁵ Community colleges and four-year college and university programmes, respectively.

democracy-optional college curriculum, or worse: new financial models that foreground job-skills-only, democracy-discarded approaches to college learning.

U.S. democracy needs new financing models for curriculum pathways that position graduates as inventive problem-solvers, ready to work on democracy's fierce urgencies and well-prepared for a fast-changing economy.

In the U.S, successful leadership for change always bubbles up from the grassroots, until what once was peripheral becomes a new frontier. The College Promise movement and the Democracy Learning movements exemplify this dynamic.

That said, the U.S. now needs a catalytic agency that can distil the change energy rising from the grassroots and propel the new designs for college financing and democracy-engaged learning to become the reigning standard for good practice. This catalytic agency should be freed from the yin and yang of political infighting.

Our proposal for the longer term, therefore, is the creation of an independent and ongoing Democracy's Promise Trust to provide high profile leadership for systemic educational redesign, new curriculum pathways, and new financial models, including no-debt financing strategies for U.S. learners.

The Trust would be charged and funded to work in coalition with the full array of higher education "influencers" – institutional membership associations, faculty associations, accreditors, policy leaders at the federal and state level, business and civic leaders, school leaders and students themselves. Sustainable financing for the Trust would come from government matched by civic-minded philanthropies, business and civic organisations committed to educational innovation and reform.

The Democracy's Promise Trust would first update and then help enact the Framework for Twenty-First Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement created in 2012 by the federally commissioned National Task Force that framed *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (See Appendix for Framework).

The update would address learning related to U.S. democracy's racial and inequity reckonings, and the rise of authoritarian movements across the world. The framework would be applied, as the *Crucible Moment* authors intended, at all levels, from school through higher education, including general education and college majors (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012: 26-30).

A second task would be a creative examination and redesign of how schooling at all levels should be financed in the U.S., undertaken with the goal of providing new resources to the nation's education deserts, new investments and guidelines for quality learning at all levels and new strategies for making access to quality and democracy-enabling learning affordable for all Americans, not just the fortunate few.

If higher education is to help create a more just and equitable democracy, its fiscal and educational practices must be reinvented. That reinvention should not be siloed but should facilitate equity and democracy-enabling reforms at all educational levels. The Democracy's Promise Trust we propose is intended to guide, align and surge those needed reinventions.

Lifting America's Soul

In sum, we humbly and boldly offer a local-state-federal policy partnership that integrates College Promise and Democracy Learning spurred by a widespread call to action to advance the priorities and solution described in this chapter. We see this as one of several rescues for our democratic society, desiring a full recovery to inspire and sustain our nation's social, civic and economic prosperity for which most Americans long.

Americans have long espoused equality in access to opportunity for all. This remains the essential first step for higher education in our rescue imperative for the 21st Century. Getting students through high school and into college is only one step forward. The real question is what knowledge, skills, and practical opportunities learners should gain to graduate as civic-minded, solution-oriented adults in a democratic society.

Before his passing in July 2020, Civil Rights icon The Honourable John Lewis told Americans: "Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America...Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe because we must put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others.... Now it is your turn to let freedom ring...When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last ..." (Lewis 2020).

Looking forward, we envision a new democratic policy partnership that will deliver on the priorities of the Civil Rights Act and the numerous Higher Education Reauthorisations, once and for all. This new partnership will connect, inspire and fund a sustainable College Promise for all who seek new access to opportunity through higher education. And it will provide an unparalleled high quality civic-minded, solutions-oriented, problem-solving, inspiring education beyond high school that will engage graduates with the conditions so aptly outlined by the Congress and Presidents from 1964 through 2008, by the European ministers in 2009, and by the authors of these chapters.

Appendix: Framework for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012)

Knowledge	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarity with key democratic texts and universal democratic principles and with selected debates — in US and other societies — concerning their applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of the diverse cultures, histories, values and contestations that have shaped US and other world societies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical and sociological understanding of several democratic movements, in both the US and abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to multiple religious traditions and to alternative views about the relation between religion and government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding one's sources of identity and their influence on civic values, assumptions and responsibilities to a wider public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of the political systems that frame constitutional democracies and of political levers for influencing change
Skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical inquiry, analysis and reasoning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative reasoning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering and evaluating multiple sources of evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking, engaging, and being informed by multiple perspectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written, oral and multi-media communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberation and bridge building across differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to communicate in multiple languages
Values	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for freedom and human dignity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-mindedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical integrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility to a larger good
Collective Action	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of knowledge, skills and examined values to inform actions taken in concert with other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigation of political systems and processes, both formal and informal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral discernment and behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compromise, civility, and mutual respect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public problem solving with diverse partners 	

Source: The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. 2012. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Page 4. *A Crucible Moment* was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and developed in concert with K-16 educators, civic organisation leaders and research scholars from all parts of the United States.

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