Many people are worried about democracy's health and efficacy, yet working to reinvent democracy seems daunting. One place to start might be to identify and understand threats that may be undermining democratic systems and culture and resisting efforts to make democracy more equitable and representative of a diverse populus. Naming the problems might help advance efforts to address them through education.

Democracy’s threats are complex, multi-layered, and intersecting, making change through higher education difficult to realize without understanding them. After many focus groups with educators and representatives of democracy reform groups, we categorized democracy’s threats the following way:

1. **Democratic Backsliding & Disenfranchisement**: Democracy is backsliding on fundamental civil rights that were enacted to support and protect underrepresented and disenfranchised populations in the United States.

2. **Structural Inequality & Overlapping Systems of Oppression**: Longstanding systems of inequality (e.g., policies, laws, cultural practices) are reproducing and exasperating inequities in the population especially by gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and class.

3. **Disinformation & Division**: Disinformation and hateful rhetoric are fostering an uninformed and divided nation, giving way to extremism, white supremacy, ethnocentrism, and even violence.

4. **Distrust in Government & Institutions**: When government institutions fail to equitably represent the U.S. population and laws or their application disenfranchise the most vulnerable and underrepresented groups, people feel excluded, distrustful, and lose faith in those in power, and even each other.

5. **Excessive Individualism & Lack of Collective Responsibility**: The current culture of individualism trumps collective needs and problems, resulting in a lack of compassion and capacity for collective problem solving among and between people.

6. **Climate Change & Displacement**: Because wealthy communities will be able to adapt more easily, climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable people globally, including within the United States.

7. **Neutrality & Erosion of Academic Freedom**: Government overreach and politically motivated demands that campuses avoid “divisive” topics, combined with tepid institutional protection of political learning and engagement in democracy, are chilling discussion, learning, and the robust exchange of ideas, especially around teaching a complete history of race and diversity in America and declines in democracy.

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For Discussion:

- Do any of these threats resonate with you? Why or why not?
- What’s missing? What would you add to this list?
- What should higher education do to fulfill its responsibilities to democracy? What institutional, curricular, co-curricular, and pedagogical approaches can colleges and universities take to prepare students for their role in redesigning a democracy in question?

For more information, contact Nancy Thomas, Senior Advisor to the President, AAC&U, and Executive Director, IDHE. nthomas@aacu.org.

About IDHE
Located at the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) is committed to providing U.S. colleges and universities with evidence-based resources and support that they need to prepare students to fight against the threats to democracy and to engage in a process of redesigning it. We define democracy as both systems of governance and as culture, ways that people live, work, and interact to advance democratic principles and practices. The goal is not to preserve democracy as it is currently practiced. Instead, we aim to empower students and institutional leaders, faculty, and staff in creating a more aspirational democracy while simultaneously guarding against threats to the idea.