

NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY

*A Model for Building Anchor Partnerships Between
Colleges and Their Communities*

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Foreword by Timothy K. Eatman

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PREFACE

Higher education faces a civic imperative while American democracy is frail and in jeopardy. That both crises are occurring simultaneously is not an accident. Each is significantly dependent on the other. Finding a robust pathway to renewal for either one will demand a recognition that both are interrelated. Higher education and American democracy require freedom of inquiry, informed citizens, and effective pathways for social and individual success. In this book, I argue that the fate of both depends on a major renewal of the civic mission of higher education in defense of a democracy that is socially inclusive, economically sustainable, and fundamentally just.

American democracy suffers from an attack on its foundational values with the resurrection of two distinct pathologies, namely, the dramatic rise in social inequality and the resurgence of racism and ethnic subordination. Both jeopardize the soul of American democracy because the rising tide of inequality and racism threaten the essential public belief of the fairness of the democratic order. Without its legitimacy, democracies are more likely characterized by greater evidence of social decay, violent eruptions, and the disbelief in a better future.

From its origins, American higher education was expected to enhance democratic governance through the development of educated and responsible leaders and citizens who would be faithful to a free, fair, and orderly society. But just as American democracy needs higher education to reassert these civic responsibilities, colleges and universities find themselves trapped in a fiscal crisis that threatens their very institutional viability, the likes of which could easily lead them to abandon their commitments to democratic learning and civic engagement. And here is the rub. The fiscal crisis of higher education is, itself, rooted in the ascending social inequality and institutional racism that undermine democratic governance.

On this point, the breach of the American Constitution and its structure of democratic government threatens the foundations of free intellectual inquiry, the reliance on reason, objective evidence, and the rule of law. On January 6, 2021, the first insurrection against the federal government since the Civil War resulted in rioters storming the U.S. Capitol in an unmitigated attack on the joint session of Congress as it was certifying the electoral college

vote of the legitimately elected forty-sixth president of the United States. This historic moment put to rest any false confidence that American democracy is impregnable and inevitable.

From the origins of the American republic, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson argued that higher education has an obligation to prepare its students for their responsibilities as learned and engaged citizens. Universities accepted that challenge as part of the fabric of their existence. The civic mission of colleges has ebbed and waned during eras of economic, racial, and international strife, but now its civic role is paramount. Higher education must play an aggressive role in defending democracy. It cannot succeed and flourish without a vibrant commitment to an inclusive democracy that appreciates free inquiry with access and means for all who seek higher learning. In the face of explicitly antidemocratic political forces such as the rise of White supremacy, anti-intellectualism, nativist bias, and a “post truth” subculture, universities and colleges can no longer take sanctuary as civically disengaged and without public responsibility for the political health of American democracy.

But at this moment, the majority of colleges and universities are floundering under a business model that has resulted in insufficient net revenue while they are becoming less affordable. Too many of their students and their families are burdened with paralyzing educational debt. Moreover, these same institutions are confronted with stagnant or declining enrollments that, with their present business model, dramatically limit any sustainable pathways to fiscal stability. Finally, demographic realities project that the fastest and largest growing sectors in the United States are the minority communities, mostly Black and Brown, who possess the fewest financial resources to afford a college or university education.

The growing economic chasm between those who can afford higher education and those who cannot plays a dual role, undermining both American democracy and colleges and universities. Institutionalized racism and economic inequality result in persistent neighborhood segregation that serves as a dramatic barrier to an inclusive democracy and a vibrant economy. Economic inequality, coupled with institutionalized racism, erodes the civic fabric necessary for the legitimacy and success of a democratic system dependent upon a creditable narrative celebrating economic opportunity, individual liberty, and personal success.

The civic imperative of higher education is twofold. First, it must rebuild the knowledge and competency critical for a functioning, inclusive democracy and, as such, prepare its students to become responsibly engaged in sustaining a diverse society. Second, and most important, this project requires universities and colleges to build and prepare a new generation of students from

poor Black and Brown neighborhoods that have been routinely neglected by, and subordinated to, a system of urban educational apartheid. Too many Black and Brown children are entrapped within what I will refer to as *shadow neighborhoods*—those that too often are invisible to the structures of power and privilege that surround them.

The purpose of this book is to chart a civic pathway for universities and colleges to renew their historic responsibility for rebuilding democracy through sustained partnerships with these shadow neighborhoods, becoming both allies and anchors with these communities as they rise together in symbiotic relationships framed around self-interest and mutual learning. This book is intended for all of the essential stakeholders of higher education, namely, presidents and chancellors, trustees and regents, faculty and staff, students and alumni. It also is meant as a charge for K–12 school leaders, major neighborhood nonprofit and corporate organizations, and public officials concerned about racial and economic justice. In short, it is aimed at the core constituencies that form strong university-neighborhood partnerships where each stakeholder group becomes an ally and anchor for the economic and civic prosperity of those invisible, shadow neighborhoods where those who are left out of the social mainstream of American life reside.

These anchor partnerships are not about altruism or a return of shadow communities as supplicants for university research and institutional needs. When based on equality, inclusion, and reciprocity, these partnerships are about building a deep commitment to democratic education, racial equity, and social transformation. They hold the potential for an expanded conception of a renewed American democracy where urban localism and citizen engagement balance out the personal estrangement and ensuing political passivity that too often can become the unintended impact of impersonal federal and state bureaucracies.

The fundamental argument of the book is presented in the first two chapters, *Democracy in Peril* and *Universities in Crisis*. Chapters 3 and 4 outline the historic and current civic mission of higher education. Chapter 5 makes the case for anchor partnerships as fiscally and educationally positive for higher education while serving as resource-rich pipelines for shadow neighborhoods. Chapter 6 offers a sampling of successful partnerships across the diverse tapestry of colleges, universities, and their neighborhoods.

Chapter 7 presents the human impact of civic work through a presentation of profiles of engaged high school and college students, faculty members, community partners, college administrators, and leaders. This was the most enjoyable chapter to write. Chapter 8 testifies to the economic and educational benefits of anchor partnerships for their local communities.

The last two chapters look toward resources and prospects for university-neighborhood partnerships. Chapter 9 outlines the roles, support, and opportunities available from the national higher education associations committed to this work. The final chapter explains the challenges and the promise of anchor partnerships for American democracy, higher education, and shadow neighborhoods. At the end of the book, I propose rediscovering “neighborhood democracy” as a viable approach to reinvigorating citizen participation and social transformation in building a new emerging generation of leaders for an inclusive, diverse, antiracist democratic order.

I have been rereading Ralph Ellison’s enduring classic of American literature, *Invisible Man*. The concept of invisibility for the unnamed narrator remains even more prescient today. With the “new” visibility of the ever-present danger of institutionalized police violence against Black men and women and the rise of Black Lives Matter and its interracial allies, the United States has another opportunity to confront the deep scars of racism and bigotry. And, just as Ellison’s central character, his unnamed narrator, must first make himself visible to himself and then to a greater White public, so, too, must all those who believe in the words of Amanda Gorman, youth poet laureate and presidential inaugural speaker, when she stated that in order to repair, all of us must become visible to one another: “Somehow we weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken but simply unfinished.”¹ I believe that higher education can redeem its historic commitment to a vibrant and interracial American democracy through a sustained program of anchor partnerships with neighborhoods of need and a comprehensive educational dedication to civic learning and civic practice. The aim of this book is to demonstrate that civic imperative.

Notes

1. Camila Domonoske, “Not Broken, but Simply Unfinished,” *NPR*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/inauguration-day-live-updates/2021/01/20/958743170/poet-amanda-gorman-reads-the-hill-we-climb>