Who Is Community Engagement For?: The Endless Loop of Democratic Transparency

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Abstract

This article approaches college and university community engagement as a publicity practice responding to complex pressures in the U.S. higher education field. Democracy initiatives in American academia encompass a range of civic activities in communities near and far, but the forces driving their production are decidedly nonlocal and top-down. Good intentions are no longer enough for colleges and universities facing crises on a number of fronts. Today's community collaborations must be intensive, reciprocal, deliberative, and appreciative. This mission of democratic transparency pursued by institutions involves extensive efforts to certify civic empowerment for public audiences and funders, trade and professional associations, state legislatures, and federal regulators. A promotional perspective on community engagement in higher education shifts attention from the authentic grassroots transformations that are its putative focus to the larger processes driving this activity and its outcomes: not least, the pursuit of legitimacy through increasingly elaborate self-assessment strategies. This endless loop—and its demands that engagement be ever more democratic and transparent, in its practice and in its evaluation—demonstrates not only the reach of promotional transparency, but its characteristic shape and reflexive organizational routines.

Keywords

deliberative democracy, transparency, higher education, community engagement, institutional change

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Today's higher education leaders find themselves at a difficult and important decision point. A coalescence of political, social, and economic pressures may push higher education institutions to consider disengaging from their communities as they must find ways to reduce staff, consolidate programs, and focus energies on particular legislative agendas. However, we posit that a more comprehensive level of engagement between the university and its many communities will foster stronger support from multiple sources for the future of higher education and society.

—Fitzgerald et al. (2012, p. 8).

Introduction

Colleges and universities are key sites of social transformation in their societies, but have themselves undergone a "deep transformation" as a result of neoliberal policy-making over the past three decades (Berman & Paradeise, 2016; Calhoun, 2006). The rise of for-profit colleges (McMillan Cottom, 2017), the privatization of public universities (Newfield, 2016), and increasing financialization throughout U.S. higher education (Eaton et al., 2016) have raised new fears about the erosion of higher purpose within the academy. Contemporary criticisms bemoan the market orientation of the "corporate" university and the abandonment of the pursuit of learning for its own sake among debt-ridden students desperate to increase their earning power. Consider Henry Giroux's (2011) cri de coeur over the abandonment of "higher education in the service of democracy": "Memories of the university as a citadel of democratic learning have been replaced by a university eager to define itself largely in economic terms." Such critiques assume that, as preoccupation with market logics increases, the ability of the academy to service the democratic needs of society decreases.

In fact, there is a remarkable outpouring of "democracy speak" in the present moment in higher education in the United States, and it is inextricably tied to economic pressures and management trends emphasizing rigorous assessment. The contemporary picture is far more complex than that described by critics who lambast "University, Inc." (Washburn, 2005) or "Wannabe U" (Tuchman, 2009) for heedless capitulation to profit motives at the expense of democratic learning. To be sure, neoliberalism, marketization, and financialization have reshaped the popular mission of the university. But that new mission, which I call *democratic transparency*, entails a remarkably consistent framing of substantive civic authenticity as essential to the continued survival of higher education.

The activities studied in this article are not your father's community service, with its air of one-way town/gown noblesse oblige and piecemeal care for the less fortunate. What I call higher education democracy initiatives, conceived of by field leaders in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s and institutionalized throughout the sector in the 2000s and 2010s, are coordinated efforts to manage higher education outreach and service in ways that readjust community roles toward empowered participation in mutually educational, enduring civic projects. Today's grassroots reforms are the accomplishment of fieldwide organizational networks and associations that mandate that local-level collaborations be intensive, reciprocal, deliberative, and appreciative.

Validating that civic authenticity involves labor-intensive, continuing institutional assessment to ensure that efforts are not shallow window-dressing. Institutions that center community engagement in their evaluation and reward systems can be honored with a Carnegie Community Engagement Classification for the institution, while their community engagement professionals can now earn certification from Campus Compact, a national coalition. The paradox that these efforts to make shared civic life "real" are also top-down is impossible to understand without scrutinizing democratic transparency itself as a publicity practice.

Higher education democracy initiatives are by no means unique in their obsessive focus on assessment and certification. Accountability culture in higher education is a strategic institutional response that reflects a larger transparency revolution in non-profit management (Ebrahim, 2003; Krause, 2014; Strathern, 2000; Walker, 2015). Ranking and rating systems have had far-reaching and well-documented impacts, reshaping the field of American higher education dramatically (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). But the larger effects of pursuing civic ends through democratic transparency in contemporary U.S. higher education have been far less studied. This article asserts that administrators seek democratic transparency in order to enhance publicity for a wide variety of audiences, with outcomes that include new administrative roles and responsibilities, a reorientation of work toward ongoing, exhaustive self-study, and new market opportunities to make that reflexivity less labor-intensive and more visible. These larger, long-term institutional reforms are much less visible than the local civic initiatives that they publicize.

As such, this article contributes to the project described by Wood and Aronczyk in the Introduction to this issue, by relating the "ideological celebration of transparency" to the substantive and ongoing work organizational actors must undertake to produce those celebrations. In this case, elite actors in the higher education field claim that community-scale activities are worthwhile for faculty, students, and community members only if conducted transparently—and devote a substantial portion of institutional energies to promoting and validating this assumption. Placing this "endless loop of democratic transparency" in the context of related scholarship on publicity and transparency allows us to better theorize (1) how transparency in nonprofit organizations becomes routinized and (2) how democratization of organizations may accomplish a number of institutional goals beyond local empowerment (Lee et al., 2015).

Following a description of the methods used in this study, I begin the analysis by describing the current explosion of interest in local engagement initiatives throughout different types of higher education organizations in the United States, sketching a field characterized by substantial heterogeneity but also top-down efforts initiated by the federal government, national industry and professional associations, and foundations. Next, I analyze discourse around community engagement in higher education as consistently preoccupied with the mission of "democratic transparency," in which civic outcomes are authenticated and publicly shared as evidence of managerial investment in an institutional culture of engagement.

I argue here that higher education's 21st-century popular mission envisions the university as a bastion of local community-building and dialogic learning for its own

sake, which nevertheless requires external validation and ongoing institutional reform. As the quote that begins the article shows, this democratic transparency is pursued explicitly as a response to market pressures. The performance of democratic transparency for elites and public audiences is not necessarily surprising, given widespread transparency trends in nonprofit management and the embrace of "new public participation" in organizations across sectors (Barman, 2016; Lee et al., 2015). But it suggests a very different narrative—and associated administrative workload—than that assumed by critics who hail democratic learning as the key to restoring higher education to an imagined golden age untainted by economic concerns.

Method

By far the great majority of research conducted on the field of democracy initiatives on college and university campuses has been conducted by individuals, centers, and foundations directly responsible for such initiatives (see, e.g., Carcasson, 2008, 2010; Levine, 2010; Mathews, 2009). Higher education democracy initiatives *already* embrace both evaluative research on their own activities and critical dialogue on the promises and outcomes of democracy initiatives as part of their missions (Boyte, 2015; Dostilio, 2017; Welch, 2016; Woolard, 2017). The cottage industry of research publications on higher education democracy initiatives, subsidized by national associations and largely consumed by those within the field, is an aspect of their development that is worthy of study in its own right.

The research project on which this article draws focuses on contemporary democracy initiatives in U.S. higher education, and more specifically on the professional discourse surrounding preferred management practices and ideal outcomes in the field, drawing on a database of 900 text sources and images collected between 2012 and 2020 from news coverage, press releases, publications, brochures, social media posts, web sources, and academic publications by field insiders.[1] To supplement the archival research, I conducted participant observation between 2014 and 2019 at higher education-focused sessions at dialogue and deliberation conferences, and at webinars, in-person conferences, and workshops for higher education professionals focused on democracy and civic engagement. Combined, these data are a useful guideline to "frontstage" understandings within a settled field on shared norms, best practices, and evaluation and certification standards (Augustine & King, 2019). This article is not a comprehensive history of the evolution of popular missions in the academy, as much as that might tell us how far removed today's community engagement professional certification would seem from the community service of past generations.[2] Instead, it focuses on how the publicity practices of the higher education field today are influenced by related reforms in making transparency and participation manageable for administrators and institutions in the current era (Kelty, 2019). It is also critical to note that this analysis does not engage with related but distinct processes occurring in higher education in other regions of the world, although there are increasing efforts by U.S. higher education actors to export democratic transparency routines beyond North America.[3]

Table 1. Typology of Higher Education Democracy Initiatives.

Domain	Education	Research	Community
Values	Educating future citizens and global leaders; experiential, mutual learning in local and nonlocal disadvantaged communities	Scholarship that advances democracy and the public interest; deliberative, participatory research conducted in collaboration with those affected	Nonadversarial processes that bring communities together on issues of public interest; asset-oriented deliberation and collaboration among stakeholders on shared challenges
In contrast to	One-time stopgap service projects	Basic research, inaccessible theory	Ivory tower, town versus gown
As enacted through concepts like	Community-based learning, civic education, global citizenship	Engaged scholarship, participatory action research, public philosophy, public sociology, engaged humanities	Public deliberation, community conversations, deliberative polling, National Issues Forums
Institutional examples	Curricular: Public service graduation requirement (Tulane University, 2006), CIVC 101: The First-year Civic Engagement Course (Drexel University, 2012), Cocurricular: Engineers without Borders (UC Boulder, 2002)	Participedia (University of British Columbia, 2013), Certificate in Public Scholarship (University of Washington, 2010)	Center for Public Deliberation (Colorado State University, 2006), National Institute for Civil Discourse (University of Arizona, 2011)

A Quick Guide to Higher Education Democracy Initiatives

The past two decades have seen a veritable revolution in democratic participation across a variety of social institutions, from government to corporations to community organizations (Lee et al., 2015). Higher education has been central to this participatory renaissance. I have broadly denoted these efforts under the umbrella term *democracy* or *engagement initiatives/projects*, but a better understanding of the range of activities they refer to is necessary before analyzing the field further. The terms *civic, community, participation, engagement, democracy*, and their relatives are abstract, and connote many different forms of activity, from voluntarism and service to voting, political campaigning, and social activism. What does the use of these terms in the academy really mean, and who is engaging what, in the case of higher education? As it turns out, the terms denote a variety of distinctive activities in the domains of education, research, and community action (see Table 1).

First, colleges and universities may be an "incubator" for the civic and political participation of students and alumni (Stevens et al., 2008). In response to concerns about civic decline, higher education has become a site for the kind of democratic learning formerly associated with secondary education civics classes. But consuming

information about civics is not enough. Today's engaged pedagogy also entails a Deweyan "experiential" component—the actual empowerment and civic engagement of students within and beyond the formal curriculum. These may include both encouraging students to build democracy in the on-campus community and strengthening engagement between students and others beyond campus, whether in the surrounding areas or further afield (Adler, 2019). "Service learning" or, more recently, "community-based learning"—emphasizing community members as teachers rather than service recipients—of this sort focuses on the educative function for the student of engaging democratically with others (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011).

Doing good is no longer a sufficiently sophisticated moral mission, but rather the hierarchical relationship of the classroom and prior service encounters must be adjusted to a collaborative one of reciprocity and mutual benefit in which the disadvantaged community becomes the teacher and students are educated in critical issues of social justice and privilege (Butin, 2005; Tiessen & Huish, 2013). These forms of learning occur inside classes, where accounting students might organize and conduct tax workshops or creative writing students might workshop with teen mothers or prisoners, for example. Civic engagement itself may be a formally recognized and distinct part of the curriculum, through core courses, certificates and badges, minors, and even majors (Butin & Seider, 2012). Outside of the classroom, such activities might be formally sponsored and organized by school administrators, or may be the projects of student-organized clubs like Engineers without Borders.

Second, faculty have also escaped the ivory tower to infuse participation into their research and to cocreate knowledge with larger publics (Post et al., 2016). This activity responds directly to critiques that scholarly research's remoteness from everyday people and the "real" world may lead to ineffective problem-solving and withdrawal of collective support for research funding. As in engaged pedagogy, engaged scholarship should be participatory and experiential—as indicated by terminology like "participatory action research" and "citizen science" (Heigl & Dörler, 2017; Lashaw, 2013). Low and Merry (2010, p. S203) define five distinct forms of engagement that encompass engaged anthropological scholarship, from "sharing and support" to "social critique, collaboration, advocacy, and activism." Burawoy (2005, p. 4) challenged sociologists to conduct "public sociology" in order "to engage multiple publics in multiple ways," as distinct from inaccessible or technocratic forms of scholarship in critical sociology or policy-oriented sociology. Since the institutional structures for academic research are already in place, the development of engaged scholarship within the academy typically has involved the rearrangement of incentives to reward professors for conducting research that is "community-based" or focuses on public engagement with science and the humanities.

Third, colleges and universities have become a "hub" for collaborations between communities and their stakeholders (Carcasson, 2008; Stevens et al., 2008). This encompasses activities whose primary purpose is not assumed to be the education of students or research of faculty. After Putnam's (1995) scholarship raised the alarm on the decline of civic capacity in the United States., community engagement initiatives in higher education proliferated (London, 2010). The institutional structures

for community collaboratives are much less standardized than those for fostering democratic education and research. On the one hand, universities can create or subsidize spaces that serve as a neutral public sphere for democratic engagement among community stakeholders. On the other hand, academic entrepreneurs may construct centers or institutes to apply the findings of academic research on democracy in the real world. After the 2008 financial crisis, communities seeking to plan and problem-solve in the face of scarcity have sought out institutes that promote appreciative, deliberative, and consensus-oriented democratic engagement (Lee, 2015; Mathews, 2009). Centers and initiatives for community-centered democracy activities in higher education are characterized by experimentalism and heterogeneity, in part because the multilevel, multistakeholder relationships they draw on to sustain themselves are complex.[4]

The three categories of activities sketched above describe the breadth of activities falling under the umbrella of "democracy" and "engagement" in the academy. But one of the signal characteristics of higher education democracy initiatives is the extent to which such efforts blur and bridge boundaries between education, research, and community and value this blurring on its own merits. The field as a whole is characterized by a variety of institutional arrangements and locations. The institutions recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as distinctive in their emphasis on community engagement through its elective Community Engagement Classification, begun in 2006, are widely distributed throughout the country and involve the full range of United States not-for-profit academia (see Figures 1 & 2).[5] Many democracy initiatives are located within departments or schools of law, medicine, public administration, planning, social work, political science, and communications. Other efforts involve stand-alone centers and institutes, some independently funded and only loosely affiliated with their institutions. All of the differently shaded terms for civic engagement and combinations of organizations, disciplines, and interests can be deceptive, however. As the analysis to follow shows, the central themes and discourses of these projects, and their networked coordination, reveal a field with a great deal of consensus about shared priorities and how they should best be implemented and measured.

Beyond the efforts of individual colleges and universities, the past three decades have seen expansive national efforts to encourage best practice sharing in higher education democracy initiatives.[6] A wide range of public and nonprofit organizations have coordinated and funded these initiatives at the national level, beginning in the 1980s and proliferating in the late 1990s and 2000s. Whereas the preceding descriptions of heterogeneity in the field of higher education democracy initiatives might give the sense of grassroots action at least at the scale of the organization, the networked coordination of top-down democracy promotion (to say nothing of the elite character of its leaders or its grand scope) may seem remarkable. These activities are aspirationally ambitious, involve hundreds and even thousands of institutions, and are typically characterized by organizational collaboratives across sectors focused on advancing the shared mission of democratic transparency. I list just four ongoing national-level democracy efforts conducted in the past 35 years in Table 2, if only to give a sense of their complex interrelationships. As Table 2 illustrates, interest in

Figure 1. U.S. higher education institutions with Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, 2018 (*N* = 360).
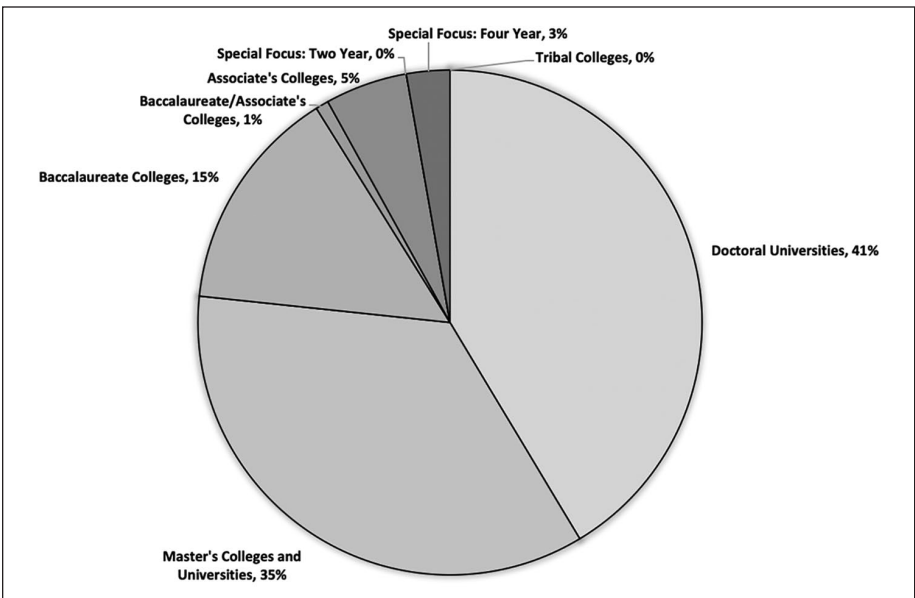

Figure 2. Carnegie Community Engagement Institutions by Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHE) category, 2018 (*N* = 360).

Table 2. A Selection of Ongoing National-Level Initiatives for Democratic Transparency, 2020.

Name and main sponsors or affiliates	Description	Mission	Founding date
Campus Compact	"Campus Compact is a national coalition of nearly 1,100 colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education."	"Advancing the public purpose of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility"	1985
Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life: Affiliated with Campus Compact, the American Democracy Project, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)	A higher education consortium focused on civic work in the humanities and founded by 21 college presidents following a White House conference, it now includes 100 higher education institutions as members	"… IA strengthens and promotes public scholarship, cultural organizing, and campus change that inspires collective imagination, knowledge-making, and civic action on pressing public issues."	1999
American Democracy Project: American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)	"The American Democracy Project (ADP) is a network of more than 250 state colleges and universities focused on public higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy."	"to produce college and university graduates who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences they need to be informed, engaged members of their communities."	2003
Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Network: Includes AASCU, AAC&U, Campus Compact, and NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education	As of 2019, 12 organizations that reach "two thousand universities and colleges (both 2-year and 4-year) and include more than eight million students" committed to advancing the recommendations of the "A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future" report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education	"to fulfill a bold national agenda that will move civic learning from the periphery to the center of student learning"	2012

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democracy promotion extends from frontline student affairs staffers to university presidents and policy makers. Associations for the advancement of higher education have organized some of the most ambitious programs for the promotion of democracy, frequently in collaboration with national foundations and the federal government in the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama presidencies.[7]

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the scope and scale of national conferences and much-touted reports on the state of higher education engagement, the mission statements of democracy initiatives are imbued with moral language reflecting the priorities described in this section, such as emphasizing practical efficacy, deliberative democracy, experiential and collaborative learning, avoidance of adversarial and expert models, and appreciation of the nonmonetary assets of disadvantaged people. For example, Princeton University's Pace Center for Civic Engagement, an umbrella organization for the university's service organizations and community initiatives, describes the "elements of active citizenship" it hopes to cultivate:

- Recognition that we all have an obligation and an opportunity to work *collaboratively* to improve our communities
- Active involvement in the democratic process, including thoughtful and regular participation in *deliberative* discussion, respect for diverse opinions, and recognition of the value of every community member's contribution
- Sustained focus on solving public problems using academic, intellectual, and technical *skills* and building on informed understandings of communities' needs and *assets*
- Commitment to *effective* leadership and collaborative work to promote the public good. (Italics added)

Drexel University in Philadelphia has taken a similarly ambitious stance, with its president committing Drexel to be "the nation's most civically engaged university, with community partnerships integrated into every aspect of service and academics." Drexel's Lindy Center for Civic Engagement's mission statement claims that it promotes:

> the ideals of social responsibility and public service by facilitating community based experiential learning for students, faculty, and staff. Through collaborations with the community, we improve the public good on the local, national, and global levels while enriching the scholarship and character of Drexel through enhanced education.

Democracy projects' extensive, multilevel mission statements are uniform in their emphases on the need for changing the world at the local level, reciprocity but also rigor, deliberative dialogue but also practical efficacy, voluntarism but also skill. Similarly, the terms that national level collaboratives use to describe their work link seemingly divergent values. In explaining Imagining America's "Civic Professionalism" project on its website, the desire to advance democracy in the university is explicitly linked to pressures for career outcomes:

> Given the pressure higher education faces to be more pragmatic, new strategies for affirming and furthering the power of civic/community engaged learning in the contexts of an undergraduate liberal arts education are needed. . . . *Civic professionalism* marks the intersection of academic knowledge, vocational exploration/development, and a commitment to the common good.

In these cases, reframing the shared language of virtuous engagement in the present performs the important work of resolving tensions observed in the past between democracy promotion, university budgeting, and other important goals, producing potential "win-win-win" outcomes in the future.

Accomplishing such complex missions is obviously a tall order. Is all of this democracy speak just lofty talk? As the following section describes, an integral part of democratic transparency as practiced today means holding organizations to their promises about authentic community engagement by deepening and democratizing their assessment routines.

Democratic Transparency in Higher Education: Validating Civic Authenticity by Intensifying Assessment

The prior section provides a sense of the diversity of higher education democracy initiatives in terms of institutional and geographic locations and domains of activity. This section will argue that despite diverse origins, the field has embraced the current era's particular vision of democratic transparency as ongoing institutional and professional assessment, which has led to a number of understudied outcomes. From institute mission statements to national self-study guidelines to press releases, the consistent emphasis throughout is on the virtue of substantiating managers' institutional commitments to an authentic and deep civic culture. Once democratic change has been implemented, resting on one's laurels is not allowed—institutions must continually assess their commitments and deepen levels of community participation, in activities and in their assessment. Transparency is so central to accomplishing civic authenticity that I argue it is a core mission inextricable from the promotion of democracy itself.

The less heralded outcomes of democratic transparency include a reorientation of work toward audit, benchmarking, and evaluation management, the redefinition of administrative roles, and new market opportunities to make intensive self-study processes less labor-intensive and more visible.[8] This section looks at the systematic, demanding assessment regimes developed to validate civic authenticity, through three representative examples: the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification process, the development of higher education community engagement professional certification, and the accompanying market for tools to facilitate these accomplishments (see Figure 3).

The gold standard for democratic transparency is the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's elective "Community Engagement Classification" described above, currently administered by Brown University's Swearer Center for Public Service under its College and University Engagement Initiative.[9] The definition

Figure 3. Seals of Carnegie Community Engagement classification and Campus Compact certification; below, slide of engagement tracking tools' logos, from Winchell and Pottinger (2015).

of community engagement used in application materials closely tracks the mission elaborated in the prior section:

> Community engagement is shaped by relationships between those in the institution and those outside the institution that are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes. Such relationships are by their very nature trans-disciplinary (knowledge transcending the disciplines and the college or university) and asset-based (where the strengths, skills, and knowledges of those in the community are validated and legitimized). Community engagement assists

campuses in fulfilling their civic purpose through socially useful knowledge creation and dissemination, and through the cultivation of democratic values, skills, and habits—democratic practice.

Following the Carnegie 2015 evaluation cycle, 360 institutions total held this voluntary designation, which is given every 5 years (see Figures 1 and 2 for distribution across the country and the sector).[10] Institutions must reapply for their classification after 6 years. The Swearer Center website describes the classification process as requiring intensive work within the organization, akin to the self-study familiar from accreditation processes:

> The elective classification involves data collection and documentation of important aspects of institutional mission, identity and commitments and requires substantial effort invested by participating institutions. . . . The classification is not an award. It is an evidence-based documentation of institutional practice to be used in a process of self-assessment and quality improvement.

Good intentions are not enough. In 2015, 133 institutions applied for the classification for the first time, with only 83 successful applicants—meaning nearly 40% of applicants were rejected; in the 2020 round, 109 institutions applied for the classification for the first time, with only 44 successful, a nearly 60% failure rate.

Systematic and ongoing assessment must be conducted such that community engagement pervades the university's mission and administration, from top leadership on down. Of primary importance is a structured system of communication and coordination of different aspects of community engagement throughout the institution, and the act of seeking classification in itself actualizes and demonstrates coordination of the correct moral rationales for such work. The director of an office of community-based learning at a public university that finally received the classification on its third try acknowledged, "This has been a long time coming," but claimed, "The true benefit of this classification is what the process allows you to build . . . the process of actually documenting the stuff and assessing it, allows you to improve its quality." Examples given in the campus news article announcing the change noted that "During the classification process, administration revised goal nine of [the University's] strategic plan to emphasize mutually-beneficial partnerships, changing the language of the goal from its original 'outreach'-based goal." As with the professionalization of public engagement more generally, the production of transparency becomes a virtuous end in itself, renewing the institution's commitment by dint of intensive focus on that commitment (Lee, 2015).

Today, as in 21st-century NGOs generally, seriousness in mission is determined through public performance measures, resulting in extensive initiatives to develop, collect, validate, and reward outcomes in the areas of civic learning and engagement. Typical questions in the Carnegie application include "Does the institution maintain systematic campus-wide tracking or documentation mechanisms to record and/or track engagement with the community?" and "Does the institution have mechanisms for systematic assessment of community perceptions of the institution's engagement with community?" This labor-intensive self-study is promoted not as an unpleasant obligation, but

as assuring the moral seriousness of democracy initiatives against critiques that they are well-meaning, but fuzzy or lightweight do-gooderism. Especially for cocurricular programs seen as potentially unserious, such as alternative spring break and Greek service programs, the Carnegie application asserts: "Co-curricular Engagement requires **structured reflection** and **connection to academic knowledge** in the context of **reciprocal, asset-based community partnerships**" (Bold as in original).

The work involved in producing and collecting such evidence—whether of fraternity member's reflections on their community-based work, or of surveying community partners about their relationships with community engagement offices—means a reorientation of labor in higher education from producing community engagement to producing assessment of community engagement. This is intentionally distributed across campuses, from institutional research offices to instructors of community-based learning, with an administrator from Indiana University noting that, "The strength of our application lies on the more than 120 people who described the community engagement efforts of their schools, departments and programs." Press releases of successfully classified institutions note that campus-wide teams worked on their applications for multiple years. Application for, and celebration of, the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification is a way of making community engagement transparent and public (see Figure 4).

One sign of how democratic transparency has changed administrative roles is another national-level innovation, Campus Compact's Community Engagement Professional Credentialing Program, initiated in 2015 and piloted in March 2019. Higher education engagement practitioners have the opportunity to earn 15 "microcredentials" (digital badges) in "core competency areas that are key to success in higher education civic and community engagement," including "dialogue & deliberation," "global engagement," and "assessment and evaluation." To prepare for the credential, practitioners are encouraged to engage in approved online graduate courses and communities of practice with like-minded others. Like a campus-wide self-study process, the community engagement credential entails a diagnostic self-assessment and the production of extensive[11] application materials documenting not only community engagement projects on which a practitioner has worked but also "critical self-reflection" and "personal growth and on-going professional development"—all of which, of course, involves shifting community engagement work to an intensive performance of personal democratic transparency. While the development of a field of expertise in producing civic authenticity may seem ironic, this new professional credential testifies to the very real administrative and diplomatic skills required to carry out democratic transparency on the ground, and mirrors similar certification programs developed by other simultaneously public- and elite-facing professionals like community mediators and public deliberation facilitators (Lee, 2015).

A final source of evidence of the transformation of work and roles is the development of markets for tools and trainings to assist managers in the production of democratic transparency. Conferences for community engagement practitioners have multiple vendors offering products to ease complex coordination and data collection tasks. Software packages like GivePulse, NobleHour, CBISA (Community Benefit Inventory for Social

Carnegie Community Designation press conference, Monday, February 17, 2020, in El Paso, Texas. Photo by Ivan Pierre Aguirre/UTEP Communications

CARNEGIE FOUNDATION HONORS UTEP WITH NATIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DISTINCTION

Figure 4. Image from *El Paso Herald-Post* website.

Accountability), and Collaboratory offer to collect metrics on authentic engagement to share with federal agencies, funders, and senior staff.[12] Many such tools advertise that they also collect qualitative data; student journal reflections and student engagement portfolios are not just personal records of individual transformation and career readiness, but become products for institutions to demonstrate collective impact. For the Carnegie Classification application, the question "In the past 5 years, has your campus undertaken any campus-wide assessment of community engagement aimed at advancing institutional community engagement?" refers to potential assessment tools such as: "the Anchor Institutions Dashboard, the Civic Health Index, the National Assessment of Service and Community Engagement (NASCE), the National Inventory of Institutional Infrastructure for Community Engagement (NIIICE), or others)." In 2020, Campus Compact debuted Compact2Learn™, "an online tool that enables campuses to capture student civic and community participation and learning," information that "can help institutions improve their curricular and cocurricular programs while answering questions posed by accreditors, public higher education authorities, and the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement" (see Figure 5). Evaluation regimes and software products that can document educational transformation,

Figure 5. Screenshot from Compact2Learn™ website.

reciprocity, and mutual benefit are promoted throughout the organizational infrastructure of the field, by national-level consortia, foundations, governments, associations, and centers themselves (Holton, 2015).

This section has documented the evolution over the 2000s of national-level frameworks and tools to improve higher education institutions' assessment of their ongoing institutional commitments to broad and deep democratic transparency. Such an analysis would not be complete, however, without recognizing the extent to which these national-level frameworks demand that such assessment be subject to continuing quality improvement, regardless of the substantive civic authenticity already demonstrated.

The Endless Loop of Democratic Transparency

It is easy to see the publicity benefits of democratic transparency for higher education institutions, especially given the grave challenges facing the sector (Blanton, 2007). Many institutions are explicit about the elite audiences and grant seeking advantages they hope to reap. One of the developers of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification writes,

> Some institutions see the classification as an opportunity for national recognition, a way to honor the efforts of engaged scholars, or as a connection with the cachet of the Carnegie name . . . in grant seeking, communicating with community, and responding to constituencies for accountability purposes.

In an edited volume on the Classification, the authors of a chapter on "Engagement and Institutional Advancement" note,

Increasingly engagement has become part of the identities of these institutions, and the engagement brand has been leveraged to increase public support for these campuses. In particular, engagement as an institutional brand has been advanced to cultivate legislative support. . . . Simply put, . . . engagement provides a platform to cultivate diverse revenue streams from private and public sources. (Weertz & Hudson, 2009, p. 66)

Precisely because democracy initiatives in higher education support institutional publicity goals, their world-changing potential is viewed by many observers as unfulfilled, vulnerable to superficiality and cooptation, and needing further institutional reinforcement in the form of more democratic and more intensive assessment regimes. While tracking software and assessment tools have been embraced by the field for the reflection they can induce, there is also consensus that they are not nearly deep enough. In my observations of conference panels for higher education practitioners on developing metrics, and in special journal issues on engagement tracking (Holton, 2015), discussions focus on going beyond reductive measures to develop more sophisticated tools that capture the multiple complex dimensions of democratic missions. A report by the Senior Director of Assessment and Research at the AAC&U, titled "A Brief Review of the Evidence on Civic Learning in Higher Education," described the "urgent need" to improve assessment:

Existing data on civic outcomes is almost entirely based on student self-reports of their behaviors, attitudes, and growth over time. . . . Greater evidence is needed on outcomes more closely associated with civic competencies or capacity building, particularly for success in an increasingly global and diversifying nation (e.g., collaborative problem-solving, deliberative dialogue, teamwork). . . . The development of outcomes or evidence related to global knowledge and skills is particularly thin . . . greater evidence is needed on the ways in which variations in civic learning (i.e., forms of practice and levels of intensity) impact measures of student success. (Finley, 2012, p. 3)

Counting page views or including a question on deliberative process satisfaction is easy; measuring whether people were actually empowered by your intervention is much more difficult. The Engagement Scholarship Consortium seeks "to work collaboratively to build strong university-community partnerships *anchored in the rigor of scholarship*, and designed to help build community capacity" (Italics added). Imagining America's initiative titled "Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship (APPS)" goes even further, arguing that proper assessment should take an "integrated approach to assessment rooted in five core values—collaboration, reciprocity, generativity, rigor, and practicability." In other words, the process of assessment of "transformational processes" should itself be transformative, collaborative, deep, and engaging.

Needless to say, the ideal of rigorous assessment systems that can also serve community needs while they seek to evaluate the achievement of them is setting the bar very high—especially inasmuch as community stakeholders invited to define assessment goals may not see the point of assessment at all, or may see it as incidental to

their own goals. The Carnegie Classification application asks, "Are there mechanisms to systematically collect and share feedback and assessment findings regarding partnerships, reciprocity, and mutual benefit, both from community partners to the institution and from the institution to the community?" and also requires that community partners confirm they are aware of the same in an e-mail survey. Such demands may have perverse consequences, wherein engagement professionals producing democratic transparency for institutions seek out those partnerships and stakeholders likely to already have the capacity and resources to participate in successful evaluation—as seen in NGOs' implementation of humanitarian relief projects driven by assessment (Krause, 2014).

But within a popular mission of democratic transparency, democratizing top-down democratic engagement assessment regimes is an obvious next step for many organizations. A document on revisions to the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification's 2020 framework acknowledges the difficulty of walking the talk on community engagement:

> Our goal is to continue to move toward a revision process that is transparent, inclusive of stakeholders in the field, and reflective of the participatory values of the field. . . . While the 2020 revision cycle has been more extensive, open, and inclusive than prior cycles, we know we can do better.

Academic evaluations persistently lament the failures of democracy initiatives in higher education (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hodges & Dubb, 2012; Stoecker, 2016). Critics of national-level efforts see "fragmentation and drift" in higher education's civic commitments (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

In the 2000s, democratic transparency initiatives blending critical evaluation with engagement have themselves invited critique, and those critiques have been integrated into those missions in increasingly complex, multilayered ways—most obviously by the demand that assessment of democracy initiatives must itself be democratic. This endless loop, or "impasse," mimics that of many progressive organizations and NGOs in the current era of accountability, as described by Lashaw (2013). Meanwhile, the promise of local democracy in higher education as a route to larger societal benefit recedes into a hopeful future. Social change in the present is focused on the symbolic politics of quality improvement in institutional management practices, such that the agents of community engagement are properly credentialed, the outputs of community engagement are transparently and collaboratively measured, and those quality metrics are communicated publicly to nonlocal audiences: field elites, institutional peers, accreditors, legislators, and classifying bodies within the higher education field.

Democratic Transparency as an Ongoing Response to Pressures in the Academy: Can the Endless Loop Be Broken?

This study has analyzed burgeoning efforts to promote civic behaviors and citizenship practices, intergroup and interorganizational relationships—at a time when higher

education institutions are also under pressure to demonstrate return on investment, reduce costs, and advance knowledge and regional economic growth. The development of the 2000s' popular mission of *democratic transparency* in U.S. higher education is substantively addressed to contemporary social and economic anxieties facing communities and their academic institutions. The complex mission required within democratic transparency includes practical amelioration of urban problems through organizational partnerships encouraging interaction and appreciative dialogue, and the mutual education of students and needy community members in deliberative democracy in order that they all become more effective citizens. The top-down practices thought to yield these outcomes for colleges and universities are the accountability tools currently in vogue nationally for producing transparency and publicity across a wide variety of organizations. As I have argued here, the impacts of using those tools to demonstrate bottom-up social change are understudied, despite the fact that they involve substantial and labor-intensive institutional reforms.

Critics often assert that higher education has become a profit-seeking, individualistic enterprise, and mourn an egalitarian vision of liberal education that transcended prosaic economic concerns. As this article has shown, a belief in local democracy as the route to liberal learning, soul-changing experience, and global transformation actually permeates the current institutional structures, intellectual agendas, and resource networks in the field of U.S. higher education. The democratic mission promoted by federal agencies and third sector organizations across all levels of the academy, however, melds community voluntarism with professionalized vocation, achievable at the same time through the right kind of externally validated and internally democratized community-scale projects. The certified community engagement professionals who pursue these ideals join a class of other progressive professionals engaged in the overarching "moral project" of neoliberalism (Moreton, 2007; Mudge, 2008). Making visible the real and difficult work they do for a variety of audiences renders a very different sense of their larger political accomplishments, and demonstrates the extent to which authenticating democratic transparency has become a routinized part of institutional management and publicity.

Many hope democratic missions will reinvigorate the academy's critical role in society, and counter universities' political subordination to corporations and elites. Higher education organizations' preoccupation with documenting the incomplete realization of civic education and practical problem solving for the needy, as in other empowerment projects (Eliasoph, 2011), may seem like a salutary feature for ambitious progressive organizations hoping to better reform America's civic landscape. But today's mission of democratic transparency does not challenge the systemic crises of contemporary politics so much as it links "best practices" in community problem-solving initiatives to reflexive critique of the institutional management of transparency *within* the colleges and universities involved. The extensive, intensifying labor to get democracy "right" in so much higher education reform is very much a dynamic political achievement that claims a powerful future societal role for higher education organizations and enhances the present relationships of academic elites with their policymaking allies and third sector partners—no less important than the community politics that they claim are the morally preferred means for changing the world.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. For readability, the sources of quotes from research materials are described within the text but not cited in the reference list, because they can easily be located in a web search of the text string within quotations.
2. For a history of the evolution of the "civic engagement" mission since 1984, see Hartley and Saltmarsh (2016).
3. See, for example, efforts to extend the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification internationally (piloted in Ireland in 2015-2016), and the Talloires Network, "an international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education," begun in 2005 by the president of Tufts University (Hollister et al., 2012, p. 81).
4. Whereas researchers and students have formal, and formally subordinate, ties to their institutions, community organizations and other stakeholders engaged in collaborative initiatives sponsored by higher education organizations do not. In some cases, participants in community-centered democracy activities like a participatory budgeting process or a community dialogue may not even be aware of college or university sponsorship, because the institution may be just another name in a long list of community partners.
5. Relative to the percentage of students enrolled in these types, master's-granting institutions and baccalaureate colleges are overrepresented and associate's colleges are underrepresented.
6. For an overview of national initiatives, see Woolard (2017, p. 18).
7. While the changed dynamics of higher education engagement in the Trump era are still unfolding, including a resurgence of student activism and political engagement unrelated to top-down promotion by national-level organizations, Trump's election has created new opportunities for national-scale foundations and associations to draw attention to the value of higher education engagement initiatives in repairing democratic deficits.
8. These outcomes are, not coincidentally, very similar to those studied by Espeland and Sauder (2016) with respect to public performance measures in law schools.
9. Carnegie is central, but supported by many complementary reward and benchmarking systems in the field. The President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll for college and university democracy initiatives recognizes "institutions that achieve meaningful, measurable outcomes in the communities they serve." At the state level, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Vision Project requires metrics on how well colleges in Massachusetts "prepare citizens."

10. Originally, the 2015 classification included 361 institutions, but one has since reorganized in a merger.
11. For early career professionals, this includes a "narrated, 15- to 20-minute video presentation on the fundamentals of community engagement."
12. The Carnegie online application is even hosted by GivePulse, to "help further streamline, advance and scale the work this framework can provide to institutions."

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