

Public Higher Education and the Responsibility to Invite Students to the Political

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On November 10, 2016, just following the presidential election of Donald Trump, *The Atlantic* magazine published one among many articles asking the “How could this happen” question. How could Donald Trump, a man who does not appear to feel either the constraints or the heavy responsibility that constitutional government imposes on our leaders, have been elected President of the United States? The article, then, raises the possibility that the problem lies with a deficiency of civic education in American schools:

Public schools are failing at what the nation’s founders saw as education’s most basic purpose: preparing young people to be reflective citizens who would value liberty and democracy and resist the appeals of demagogues. In that sense, the Trump phenomenon should be a Sputnik moment for civics education. Just as Soviet technological advances triggered investment in science education in the 1950s, the 2016 election should spur renewed emphasis on the need for schools to instill in children an appreciation for civic values and not just a skill set for private employment.¹

The authors, Kahlenberg and Janey, argue that “the costs of neglecting democratic values in education are now glaringly apparent on several levels.” They maintain that only those tutored in the principles of democratic government can both understand and put into practice democratic values. They also point out that “in recent years, democracy has been given short shrift in American public schooling.” Partly, this neglect derives from an old understanding that the Constitution is essentially self-sustaining, that the rule of law maintains itself, and that there is no need to teach and cultivate informed citizenship and leadership. As a result, in many cases, the emphasis in education has shifted more in favor of producing career-ready students, with little to no discussion

of what is required to educate democratic citizens and leaders capable of understanding the ideas and principles at the core of and necessary to sustaining a healthy constitutional democratic order. This practical impulse in education is as old as American constitutional democracy, but, in fact, the most practical education has always been one that educates and prepares the young for their responsibilities as informed and active citizens and leaders in a representative democracy.

It is not, however, quite the case that civic education has been eradicated from the realm of higher education policy. In fact, during the presidency of Barack Obama, the administration issued a “national call to action” that resulted in the creation of a “National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement.” The report the task force produced and disseminated in 2012, “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future,” concluded that it was necessary to “reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission of schools and of all sectors within higher education,” by reversing “the current national narrative that erases civic aims and civic literacy as educational priorities contributing to a social, intellectual, and economic capital.”²

The “Crucible Moment” report is correct that public universities in particular offer an obvious venue for providing this education to students who are coming of age politically—that, in fact, public universities have a civic responsibility to engage students and the community in a discussion of the ends of self-government and the means that are required to sustain the responsible and well-informed populace on which a healthy, functioning constitutional democracy depends. If public education, especially the public university, is not the place where students refine their learning of the principles and practice of liberal democracy, and learn how to discuss the most important political questions and pressing public issues of their time, then, where else can we expect them to learn about ideas, to acquire the knowledge of politics, and acquire an understanding of the First Amendment principles of free speech that is necessary for the open exchange of ideas and the classical liberal tradition that has informed American democratic institutions since the nation’s inception?

The task force clearly believed it was reforming and reinstating the importance of civic education for a new cadre of college students entering a new age of “U.S. and global interdependence.” The report paid respect to the importance of understanding American history and fostering “progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student.” And yet, after the 2016 presidential election, there are still calls to revive and strengthen civic learning. So, it seems necessary to consider why, after the efforts of

the Obama administration Department of Education and the special task force it created, both the political left and right remain discontented, although for very serious and different reasons, with the state of civic education in the United States.

Expressive Individualism and Identity Politics

It is possible that Donald Trump's election will have the salutary effect of providing a real "Sputnik moment" for civic education, but what form should that education take? The authors of the *Atlantic* article call for the reinstatement of "democracy back into education." And they argue rightly that "rigorous courses in history, literature, and civics would cultivate knowledge of democratic practices and a belief in democratic values."³ But, again, this was the siren call of the "Crucible Moment" report, the need to reinstate the sort of civic liberal education in "the traditional academic disciplines" that produces serious, thoughtful human beings capable of assuming the weighty responsibilities of American—and, the report adds, global—citizenship.

It is in the next part of the *Atlantic* article's argument, however, that the authors stray into calling for the study of American history, politics, and government informed by identity group and movement politics, the direction and content that has in part led us to our current predicament: the study of "the brutal suppression of African Americans and other minorities, women, workers, and gays, but also the movements to abolish slavery, gain women's suffrage, establish labor laws and civil rights legislation." The study of slavery, the women's suffrage movement, and the subsequent political movements often modeled on their success are indeed important themes in the study of American history, but, in fact, those are the subjects that most American history textbooks continue to address.

What is missing is the education that the *Atlantic* authors seem to call for initially, a truly liberal civic education that forges us as a community of citizens involved in a common enterprise. This education would include the study and critical assessment of the ideas and documents that both inform and have influenced American constitutional democratic institutions and government in the past and the present—and will continue to do so in the future. Such an education provides Americans of every background with common principles and language and serves as a source of unity, both in public K–12 schools, on which the *Atlantic* article chiefly focuses, as well as in American public universities. The *Atlantic* authors, much like the authors of the "Crucible Moment" report, believe they are calling for a high-minded civic education that will teach the

young to understand the principles of liberal democracy and to resist the siren call of demagoguery. So, what accounts for the discrepancy between the liberal civic education the *Atlantic* authors think they want and the civic education the country needs? And where do we go from here? This essay addresses these questions by considering both the problem, of which the *Atlantic* and “Crucible Moment” authors are aware, and the civic education that would be required to address fully the crisis they identify.

A great number of recent publications address the disunity and fragmentation of American public life, articles and books written both prior to and certainly in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.⁴ It is, however, Mark Lilla’s *The Once and Future Liberal* that pinpoints most directly and polemically what he calls “identity liberalism” as in great part to blame for the crisis of civic education in America. Lilla argues that the crisis afflicting American political life across the political spectrum, but particularly on the Democratic left, has its foundation in a crisis of civic education at American universities. Like the *Atlantic* authors, Lilla first voiced his concern in a post-2016 presidential election opinion editorial, in which he excoriates the Democratic left for dividing their electorate into grievance-based identity groups which provide no basis for unity in support of a common set of political goals or governing principles.⁵ Lilla observes that the left should not be surprised that in response to the ubiquitous “rhetoric of identity,” “white rural, religious Americans” began during the 2016 presidential election “to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.” Lilla warns liberals that those “who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it.”⁶

In *The Once and Future Liberal*, a pamphlet—a *cri de coeur* in book form, really—Lilla elaborates his concern that the “identity-based social movement”-centered politics, the legacy of the New Left in the 1970s which dominates campuses today, is to blame for the fragmented learning occurring in contemporary higher education and, as a result, in American public life.⁷ In the chapter entitled “Pseudo-Politics,” Lilla explains the development of “identity liberalism” by taking us back to the politics of the 1970s and the New Left. The slogan of the New Left was that the “personal is political.” Many interpreted the slogan to mean that “there are no spheres of life exempt from the struggle for power,” but Lilla argues that the understanding of this slogan that took hold, “that what we think of as political action is in fact nothing but personal activity, an expression of me and how I define myself,” is responsible for the splintering of American political life into tighter and narrower factions and interest groups.⁸

Lilla contends that the post-World War II era of peace and prosperity left baby boomers and, especially, their children, with an identity crisis. Lilla's observation is not new. Tom Wolfe coined the phrases the "Me Generation" and the "Me Decade" to describe the phenomenon of self-expression movements that took hold among Americans of every kind in the late 1960s and 70s. Relieved of financial insecurity and many menial tasks by a strong economy and new technology, Americans had time on their hands. People sought meaning in their lives through self-fulfillment and self-help groups, among a vast variety of activities, in search of a meaningful life.⁹ At American universities, students incorporated this quest for authenticity and meaning in their personal lives into their studies. Lilla argues that many, including students, became increasingly less concerned about engaging with the practical details of government and politics—for example, managing the practical institutions of American democracy—and more involved in what Lilla calls "movement politics."

The midcentury coalition on the political left that began with the Civil Rights and then Feminist movements provided models for successful social and political movements. But Lilla explains that the coalition could not hold. Differences within the alliance began to splinter the coalition into narrower and narrower identity groups, with each faction focused more intently on the diverse grievances afflicting it and less on common goals. Lilla laments that "citizenship dropped out of the picture," while people began "to speak instead of their personal identities ... a unique little thing composed of parts tinted by race, sex, and gender."¹⁰ The old unifying political principles gave way to the racial and gender divisions inspired by identity politics. The common desire for justice gave way to demands for racial and gender equity even within the New Left movement: African Americans "complained that most leaders were white Feminists complained that most all were men..."¹¹ Lilla explains that "[t]he only meaningful question for individuals became a deeply personal one: what does my country owe me by virtue of my identity?"¹²

Lilla turns next to explain the manner in which this focus on the self has manifested itself on the university campus. He argues that when Republicans dedicated themselves to working in the trenches to regain political power, Democrats and the New Left retreated to the universities. Lilla, a self-identified liberal democrat, does not deny that tenured liberal radicals indoctrinated students with ideas on the left, but he claims that this was not as damaging for the political health of the polity as the fact that they "passed on to students a particular conception of what politics is." Instead of the quest for knowledge that encourages "engagement with the wider world," university

education in the social sciences and humanities came to exhibit the more limited aim of bestowing and fortifying a particular, narrow identity on each student.

As Lilla observes, each student finds as a result of her studies that “her identity confers on her the status of one of history’s victims” one way or another. Consequently, the student might find a campus group dedicated to the movement work supporting and reinforcing her identity. The effect is to cocoon each student in a mutually reinforcing group of similarly identifying students who have little to do with other students, with the groups becoming increasingly narrower associations. Lilla focuses our attention, again, for example, on feminism. Today, he contends, according to third wave feminism, there is no distinct common perspective or set of issues that apply to women as a group. Instead, students are taught “that one cannot generalize about women since their experiences are radically different, depending on their race, sexual preference, class, physical abilities, life experiences, and so on.”¹³ The troubling result of “identity liberalism” for political life, according to Lilla, is that if every political or policy issue is a diversity issue, an issue involving rights or absolute moral principle, as every identity claim is, then, there is no room for moderation or compromise, or even discussion, and no issues on which consensus is possible.¹⁴ Instead, every different group, on the left and the right, locks itself into the narrow, self-reinforcing sphere of its members. It is, therefore, no surprise to Lilla that the Democrats are falling behind in electoral politics. “National politics in healthy periods is not about ‘difference,’ it is about commonality,” Lilla validly insists.¹⁵

Similarly, from the political right, Yuval Levin, in his recent book, *The Fractured Republic*, identifies an increasing tendency since the mid-twentieth century towards liberalization in American society as the chief source of decentralization and disunity, “be it toward a culture of expressive individualism or toward market economics.”¹⁶ Here, Levin is referring to an understanding of individualism described by Alexis de Tocqueville in his work, *Democracy in America*, which, I would argue, also anticipates the phenomenon of the personalization of the political Lilla describes. A keen observer of American institutions and the democratic way of life they created, Tocqueville differentiates “selfishness ... a passionate and exaggerated love of self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone and to prefer himself to everything,” from “[i]ndividualism,” which he describes as “a recent expression arising from a new idea.”¹⁷ Tocqueville explains that

[i]ndividualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.¹⁸

Levin focuses on the increasing isolation of individuals, which Tocqueville foresaw as an inevitable tendency of democratic society, and he is fully aware of the relationship of individualism so understood to Lilla's concern with the narrowing of identity groups and the danger of the ensuing fractured and polarized disunity that results in American public life. Levin argues that while the post-World War II mid-twentieth century was a time of homogenization that prioritized "solidarity and unity" in American society, during "the past half-century and more, our culture has been moved by an increasingly individualistic ideal, and so by a drive for greater distinction, more customization, and the elevation of personal choice and identity."¹⁹ Levin explains that the "ethic of our age" is "expressive individualism." The term is apt at explaining the dual desires at work today: the desire to be completely free of constraint to chart one's own path in life, and also to articulate "one's own identity."²⁰

One consequence is that our experiences are customized "around our individual preferences." Our social lives become more decentralized by our self-selection and we are less likely to encounter, either online or in our social circles, those from whom we are very different or with whom we disagree substantially. Levin celebrates the liberation of individuals, formerly constrained by society's conventions and biases, to live openly and freely as they choose in American society. He warns us, however, that with this new expressive freedom and individualism and the subsequent smashing of the mid-twentieth century moral consensus also comes a civic responsibility to find the means, some new but perhaps also the recovery of some older solutions, to create a sense of national unity and purpose.

Levin warns against conservative nostalgia for the more unified, consolidated society of the mid-twentieth century because "midcentury nostalgia will not do as a guide for action in our time," and, furthermore, it was not without its defects. Both Lilla and Levin call for what Levin identifies as "a reinvigoration of the middle layers of society and a resuscitation of our mediating institutions." For Levin, "the mediating institutions" that are broken or fraying are "family, community, and civil society."²¹ Here, Levin calls for what he describes as a thick form of

American citizenship that takes place through civic knowledge of and participation in private communities and state and local institutions of government and society, which most closely affect the character and quality of our daily lives. This “robust” idea of American citizenship is based upon the original shared ideals in the Declaration of Independence, the idea of a “free society rooted in an understanding of liberty that depends upon our institutions of moral formation and on the kind of person they produce,” who is dedicated to the principles of equality and liberty and the willingness to put them both into practice. For Lilla the answer also lies in reviving an understanding of and education for citizenship as a concept central to our democratic politics, creating “a bond linking all members of a political society over time, regardless of their individual characteristics, giving them both rights and duties.”²² Such an education would teach students to read broadly, think seriously, and engage with the ideas that exist across the political and intellectual spectrum.

Free Speech and Civic Education on the University Campus

A complementary line of inquiry recently emerged from a *Commentary Magazine* symposium, which asked its contributors to answer the question, “Is free speech under threat in the United States?”²³ Predictably, most of the participants believe that it is, and to a large degree, their concerns focus on the troubling challenges to free expression on university campuses, where the necessity of free speech is perhaps of the greatest importance if the free exchange of ideas informed by viewpoint diversity is to contribute to the acquisition of knowledge. Robert Zimmer, the president of The University of Chicago, reminds us in the final contribution that “Free speech is not a natural feature of human society.” He explains that we are all too likely to have a preference for our own opinions and inclined to succumb to the desire to impose this preference on others. Zimmer believes that it is the responsibility of universities to provide leadership about the value of free speech “within society more broadly,” by demonstrating that free speech and debate on campus contribute to a more “powerful and deeply enriching education” for students. Adam White adds Alexis de Tocqueville’s admonition that “the instruction of the people powerfully contributes to the support of a democratic republic.” Tocqueville’s argument is that democratic citizenship requires instruction, literacy, and the continual practice of self-government.²⁴ Zimmer, White, and de Tocqueville all make the argument that freedom and self-government are not self-sustaining

and that without cultivation and practice in society at large, a people could lose the civic habits necessary for both.

The founding documents of American political life, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, establish a set of fundamental principles and shared ends derived from universal natural rights, which, then, inform the civil order to which their protection gives rise. The Declaration and the Constitution provide the basic legal structure of our government, but more than that, they determine the foundation and means for uniting us in our American way of life. The Declaration of Independence asserts our equal human natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It differentiates American republican government from previous political regimes, including the ancient democracies, by leaving us free to make our own decisions about the content of our happiness within the limits the Constitution proscribes for a principled legal structure that provides us with what some would call an ordered liberty. But, as we suggested above, the legal structure alone is insufficient to sustain a constitutional democracy, to develop the sort of knowledge and practice of politics and government that cultivate healthy democratic civic life. As a result, every constitutional democracy, perhaps especially an extended, diverse, multi-racial, multi-ethnic republic, founded on shared principles and ideas rather than a long, shared history, language, and culture, requires a rigorous and sustained program of civic education. It is the sort of civic education Abraham Lincoln famously called for in his “Lyceum Address,” “a political religion,”²⁵ an education that inculcates a common set of shared principles and ideals, the habits of civic understanding and responsibility that encourage civil, active debate, discussion, and informed, even enlightened, citizenship.

American democracy needs the sort of common civic education that provides sufficient unity of civic purpose to prevent us from fracturing further into the isolated identity groups, socio-economic classes, and individualized pursuits that authors like Lilla and Levin describe, that leave us with a diminished shared civic understanding and public-spirited principles and goals. My argument is that it is the responsibility of the public university to invite students to the proverbial political table. I will turn next to a brief discussion of the traditional understanding of civic education at the time of the American Founding and why the Founders, like Lincoln, believed such an education was an essential foundation to the American political experiment. The article will, then, address the transformation of traditional civic education, informed by a rigorous liberal education curriculum composed of the history of political thought, history, and ideas of the

Western tradition, and accompanied by American history, government, institutions, and political thought and constitutional principles into what universities call “community engaged learning” or “service learning,” an effort inspired by the educational theories of John Dewey to make civic learning more active, as well as more local and community-based, but with perhaps the unintended consequence of narrowing the intellectual horizons and depth of the civic education and the intellectual experience a true civic education for a complex democracy requires.

The Founders and the Necessity of Civic Education to Ensure the Success of the American Experiment in Republican Government

George Washington was among the leading voices advocating the creation of a national university that would “cultivate the habits and mindset in citizens and public officers” necessary to ensure the success of America’s experiment with republican government.²⁶ Washington had two concerns. First, he believed that democratic citizenship and thoughtful statesmanship required broad civic learning based in the liberal arts and sciences. This civic education would cultivate the ability to think through the challenges of public life carefully by relying on the study of history, government, literature, and science. The argument was, as George Thomas puts it in his essay “Liberal Education and American Democracy,” that there is a crucial link between the habits of mind cultivated by liberal education—“the ability to grasp and evaluate arguments and evidence and to articulate and defend ideas in a reasoned manner”—and training for democratic citizenship. Washington hoped that by establishing the national university in what would become Washington, D.C., “[s]tudents with political ambitions will deepen their understanding of both principles and practice, if allowed the opportunity to observe Congress and, in the best case, to come to know some of the national leaders personally.” The broad liberal education he envisioned would provide “the theoretical defense of republican government,” while the students would learn the practice of government through Washington’s early conception of a congressional internship program.²⁷

Second, and building on this argument, was Washington’s concern that a liberal civic education, according to the most traditional understanding of it, was the means by which to liberate the minds of thoughtful citizens and potential leaders from the parochial opinions of their particular towns, cities, and states. Such an education would produce a mind capable of the sort of independent and critical thought that shapes human beings capable of providing leadership, who could take into account but also transcend local concerns to address national challenges. Washington’s most

pressing worry was one he shared with others, including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, at least at the time of the Constitutional Convention and state ratifying conventions, that local prejudices and intolerance could undermine the effort to unify Americans into an enlightened people with a shared dedication to the universal principles of liberty and equality secured by the government created through the Constitution.²⁸ Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson were aware that they faced a new kind of challenge. The United States was a nation derived from what Hamilton, in *Federalist* 9, called “the science of Politics.”²⁹ In the past, nation-states grew organically in place based upon the attachment of the people to a piece of land, a language, a culture, and a shared way of life serving as the components of unity and patriotism. The United States was a new kind of country, built around the idea that well-constructed institutions of government, created with the goal of protecting and promoting the principles and practice of liberty and equality, were the true foundation of a just political order. They knew that emotion attached people to the land, while educated reason would attach the thoughtful, the leading citizens, to the ideas on which the success of the United States depended, strengthening “national unity by promoting ‘the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners’ of Americans.”³⁰ The goal would be for the education of those invited to the national university to have a leading influence on the civic education of the American people as a whole.

The idea of a national university persisted for some time but ultimately failed to pass Congress, despite its illustrious parentage. While in theory Congressional legislators supported the idea of a national university, they were concerned about the “large sums of money” such an endeavor would require. They suspected that their constituents would not look favorably on such large expenditures by the federal government, even for education.³¹ Lorraine and Thomas Pangle also raise the question whether a national university was entirely compatible with religious toleration and democracy. The aim was to create a “nonsectarian national university” that would achieve preeminence over the regional and local, often sectarian universities, with the goal of educating the next generation of national leaders “in every field but especially in politics, by providing a thorough training in American political principles and law,” that would transcend the bounds of a particular state or section of the country. But the United States was a nation of many religious denominations. Would it be possible to create a university that provided the moral foundation considered necessary at the time of the Founding without including religious education?³² And, I would add, would a national institution of higher learning, reserved for the training and education

of an elite core of leaders, earn and maintain the support of the many people in a democracy? The conundrum seems to have proved insurmountable.

Instead, public universities at the state level became the focus of attention for those hoping to provide venues of higher education for liberal, civic, and leadership education. Thomas Jefferson, in fact, believed that there needed to be public education for all citizens if American democracy was to succeed indefinitely. This public “primary education” should aim at educating Americans both to succeed in their daily practical lives and to understand the principles and responsibilities of American citizenship. The first goal was literacy to ensure that every citizen had the ability “to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing.” The chief goal of the primary education, however, was to “instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens . . .”³³

Primary education, Jefferson believed, would provide the foundation for a higher education at a public institution like the University of Virginia, the establishment of which he dedicated his final decades. He hoped that the University would serve as a place to enlarge the minds of students through the study of ideas and books in the liberal arts, math, and the new and advancing sciences, and liberate them from the parochial opinions Washington perceived as an obstacle to the unity of purpose necessary to sustain a large, diverse country. Jefferson also expected the University of Virginia to fulfill the public-spirited purpose Washington had envisioned for a national university, that it would cultivate the habits of reflection that produce educated human beings, open to the freedom of thought and expression necessary to shape knowledgeable and active citizens and leaders. In addition, this civil and liberal education would form “the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend.” The higher education would teach these public leaders ancient and modern languages, math and the sciences, the law of Nature and Nations, History, Ideology, general grammar, political economy, and Ethics, among other subjects, all with the purpose of ensuring the ability to

expound the principles and structure of government, the laws which regulate the intercourse of nations, those formed municipally for our own government, and a sound spirit of legislation, which, banishing all arbitrary and unnecessary restraint on individual action, shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another;

And also

To develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order; And, generally, to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.

Jefferson believed that through a broad liberal education in all of the classical subjects, in addition to some practical sciences, students would learn how to think and reason in a way that informed the art of government and legislation, “the principles and structure of government ... and a sound spirit of legislation,” which he trusted would inculcate the students with knowledge of the equal rights and freedoms that tend toward public prosperity and happiness.³⁴ Like Washington, Jefferson understood that an adequate civic education would begin with the study of language and ideas about the nature of a good political order, good citizenship, and good leadership, how they come into being and how they are sustained. Only then could students begin to value, discuss, and debate those ideas, with the goal of understanding its value to the perpetuation of American institutions and democracy.

Community Engaged Service Learning

In contrast to Washington’s and Jefferson’s conceptions of a public-spirited education inculcating civic learning through the study of the traditional works in the history of political thought, history, and literature that address leadership and political order, is the newer conception of civic learning and activity at the university. Instead of telling and teaching the common American story of American political and economic history in theory and practice, American public universities have turned to a different form of civic education, “Service Learning” or “Community Engaged Learning,” which seeks to teach and encourage civic engagement by involving students in their communities and teaching them social responsibility. Those who advocate service learning agree that the neglect of civic learning is detrimental to civic participation. At this point in the argument, we have considered the traditional approach to civic education that teaches students to understand and think critically about the political and economic thought, history, and ideas that inform and

have contributed to the formation and development of American institutions and the practice of constitutional democracy. But what is “Service Learning” or “Community Engaged Learning”?

In the mid-1990s, universities started to offer what is now called “Service Learning.” Service Learning is variously described as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”³⁵ The Fayetteville State University “Definition of Service Learning” website describes the mutually beneficial activity of service learning, through which “course learning objectives are lined up to meaningful human, safety, education, and environmental needs that are co-determined with community partners and service recipients.” Students work on real world problems in the community that bring their classroom education to life. And, at the conclusion of the service learning experience, the students are asked to reflect on the experience. The Stanford University Community Engaged Learning program promises opportunities for students “to critically examine public issues, or explore one’s civic identity.”³⁶ Other Service Learning and Community Engaged Learning sites repeat similar language. For example, the University of Utah Bennion Center promises that Community Engaged Learning, which “is an integral component of the [New U Student Experience](#),” will “ensure that all U students have a transformative undergraduate experience” by gaining “vital experience outside the classroom.”³⁷

In every case, the university promises the student opportunities to meet unmet community needs that simultaneously provide high impact, practical learning experiences applied to and derived from classroom learning. These programs provide genuinely admirable efforts to engage students in finding solutions to problems in their communities. It is the sort of community engagement that could, in fact, lead students to become active citizens, problem solvers, and community leaders in local, county, and state government. Students do learn how to solve practical problems, but the learning is all practical, with no foundation in the sort of liberal education and civic learning that gives these students the intellectual tools with which to understand the causes of human behavior, the ends of human action, and how we choose to govern ourselves. The students learn how to conduct a survey, for example, but they often do not learn how government works and how working together in a community on a variety of issues through the political process can bring about citizenship that is thoughtful about the goals under consideration and strong communities. A case in point occurred at an institution I know well in which a group of students ran a survey for

a local group that promotes backyard chicken legalization. It put the students in the middle of the most persistently contentious issue in the community. The students learned how to run a survey to gather the opinion data that the pro-backyard chicken group needed to make their case, but did the students learn how to navigate this thorny issue in a democratic setting? The fact is that once the survey was complete, so was the students' work. They missed an opportunity to see local democracy at its most interesting, functioning as it is meant to do. The students conduct the survey or the community project in which they are involved, they do some good, and they earn credit for meeting challenges. Then, they are required to reflect on how successful the project was, and how it gave them a better sense of their personal "civic identities." But there is no indication that Service Learning has substantial academic content, that they have read texts that lead them to consider what the nature of civic identity is in general, what it should or could be, and how to bring it about. They are not reading, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which examines the moral and political virtues of the human beings who claim to be exemplary citizens and leaders, and how those virtues inform the content of human happiness, individually and as a community. They do not often read Montesquieu or Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* about the importance of community and civic activity to maintaining a vibrant democratic republic and a free people. In fact, it is not clear what they have learned that gives them the knowledge they need to understand even their own civic identity more fully, beyond their own reflections. Service learning is practical learning and it encourages commendable volunteerism, but it does not produce civic literacy. Like Lilla's feminist student, these service learning students are taught nothing about civic governance or the ideas that inform the organizations and democratic institutions of city or state governments. Instead, each student is sent to reflect with no material but his or her experience as a resource for how that experience has contributed to the development of a civic identity. The focus ends up on the individual identity of the student, an isolating experience, rather than on the common good and the student's relationship to it.

Service learning has its antecedent in the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey introduced a new idea of pragmatic or "progressive education," which he contrasts with "traditional education." Whereas "traditional education," according to Dewey, imposed merely obedience and learning from above by a teacher on children, a central tenet of progressive education was that it encouraged "expression and cultivation of individuality," and that rather than relying wholly on "learning from texts and teachers," it emphasized "learning through

experience.”³⁸ Dewey dismisses traditional education as a kind of “acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders.”³⁹ For Dewey this learning is static and passive, without the active participation and choice of what to learn exerted by the students, limiting rather than promoting “the intellectual and moral development of the young.” And Dewey has a point. If learning consists of reading dry summaries of old books, classical-traditional education will alienate students from the texts that should introduce them to the study of ideas and a dialogue concerning the questions an educated human being and citizen should ask and discuss.

By contrast, Dewey argues that the new “education emphasizes the freedom of the learner,” but freedom with a view to learning what? Dewey emphasizes this contrast between what he calls “traditional education” and progressive education in his brief book *Experience & Learning*, but, interestingly, this book is actually aimed at his own disciples, those implementing the progressive education he advocates. The challenge Dewey confronts in this book is that of what he calls “either or,” or, to speak more colloquially, throwing the baby out with the bath water. Dewey seems to be trying to pull progressive educators back from certain imprudent excesses. For example, at the end of his introductory chapter, Dewey argues that the traditional education is so dedicated to the study of “facts and ideas so bound up with the past as to give little help in dealing with the issues of the present and future.” The problem is that Dewey finds that his progressive teachers are standing on the sidelines passively watching the students supposedly acquire knowledge and truth on their own. Dewey seems to confess here that his theory of education has left the teachers unclear “just what ... the role of the teacher and of books [is] in promoting the educational development of the immature?”⁴⁰ He suggests here that the progressive teachers consider that there may be something to learn from the past that informs the present. The suggestion is that there also may be, after all, a role for books and teachers after all, in addition to experiential learning.

In fact, Dewey is clearly sounding an alarm of some kind in this book. He warns the progressive educators who have emerged from his own school of educational thought that if they have no theory or philosophy of subject matter or education that they can apply to experiential learning, they will find that they are “at the mercy of every intellectual breeze that happens to blow.”⁴¹ In other words, the teachers must have standards that determine when an experience is educational and when is it just an experience. And they must have real content that informs the experiential education the children are receiving. In *Experience & Learning*, Dewey tries to establish these standards for his acolytes after the fact by explaining that experience must have continuity, that it

must respond to problems that stimulate thinking, and that it must arouse “in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas.” Here, we see the source of the experiential learning practiced at contemporary universities described above. Under this progressive model of education, civic education becomes problem solving, without any reference to the serious study of the ideas and knowledge of human nature, politics, government, history, and society discovered and wrestled with in the texts of writers of the past or the present, and guided by teachers, which should provide the materials for acquiring a liberal education and civic literacy as a foundation for civic action and experience. The students are left with no intellectual context or standard by which to judge the wisdom or prudence of their contributions to civic life, except for their own reflections on their civic involvement. The result is, more often than not, a shallow, self-referential experience that fails to teach the students about the fundamental ideas, documents, and institutions of government that inform civic life and self-government in America, or to involve them in the larger debates and discussions about the alternative ideas across the spectrum of political life for addressing public policy challenges in a way that provides unity of purpose or contributes to the common good.

It is this sort of service learning which most of all informs the study that results from the Obama administration Department of Education’s “National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement” which produced the aforementioned report entitled “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future.” The task force set out to discover how, confronted with the neglect of civic education in the K–12 schools and universities, and the disengagement of American youth from political life, they could “lead a national dialogue that would result in recommendations about strengthening students’ civic learning and democratic engagement as a core component of college.”⁴² In part, the goal of the national task force was to address the apolitical nature of the new field of Service Learning, to put democracy back in civic education, and to ensure that students received an education in the serious content of civics learning and activity at university, again, especially at public universities.

The goal was to prepare university students to be “informed, engaged, and globally knowledgeable citizens.” To a certain extent, with perhaps the exception of the global perspective, the stated goals of the task force were similar to the traditional civic education we have discussed. Even the additional component of taking civic education beyond the study of books to “hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement, in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address

common problems,” sounds something like George Washington’s desire to mix the theory of government with the practice of politics in a national university curriculum.

The “Crucible Moment” report claims to be concerned with reinstating the theory and practice of politics and democracy into civic education. It essentially argues that there is a continuum of civic engagement that scholars have to do with students, from learning to read the Constitution, to doing internships, to planning rallies on behalf of a political cause. But the “Crucible Moment” report takes what tradition might call “old style civics as a given,” and then focuses on active citizenship and political engagement and even activism. “Crucible Moment” argues that “civic learning and learning in traditional disciplines are complementary, rather than competitive.”⁴³ Understood from the perspective of correcting the apolitical tendencies of Service Learning, one could see that the intention of the report to reinstate the political into civic education is laudable. The report argues that “[t]oday’s education for democracy” needs “to be informed by deep engagement with the values of liberty, equality, individual worth, open-mindedness, and the willingness to collaborate with people of differing views and backgrounds towards common solutions for the public good.”⁴⁴ The difficulty is that the “Crucible Moment” report assumes that students are reading the Constitution, the *Federalist Papers*, and learning about American institutions as a foundation for their activism on the left or on the right, but this assumption is, in most cases, too optimistic.

In fact, as I argue above, we cannot take for granted that public universities are teaching the classical and canonical documents, ideas, and history that continuously inform and shape American political life. While some teach community engaged learning, beginning with a study of the American constitutional government and institutions, there are many academics in fields like psychology and criminal justice who often supervise service learning but who neglect the serious content of liberal education as a foundation for civic engagement, either because they lack the academic resources themselves to teach it, or because they do not understand its importance. They believe that what matters most is the individual experience of participation for each student and their personal reflections on those experiences. The deficiency of civic education so conceived is that there is very little serious academic content and understanding that the students gain about the meaning of citizenship, leadership, and civic life. Instead, the experience sends them to reflect on their own thoughts, experience, and civic identity, without teaching the importance of political community, the rule of law, and the virtue of political participation by informed and civically

educated citizens and leaders.

Conclusion

Public universities must recreate the Jeffersonian civic engagement effort by two chief means: first, by providing students with a truly liberal and civic education, which includes the critical skills necessary for careful thinking, reading, and writing well, and teaching them how to use these skills to pursue knowledge of the ideas and science of politics and government at the heart of civic life that inform the principles and structure of American government; and, second, by building on that educational foundation to engage students in a serious discussion of the political, social, and policy issues confronting them, their communities, and their country today. Liberal education is an education that introduces students to the texts and ideas that compel them to challenge and question the opinions of their time and to think seriously in a way that transcends political and intellectual trends about what it is to be a serious, educated human being, a good citizen, and a good leader. Such a rigorous education that teaches students to take ideas seriously should be a source of humility. No one individual has the answer to our political challenges and hence moderation is required for us to work together to find the answers. In this way, liberal civic education is the beginning or the source of civic unity, not because it brings about consolidated opinion or agreement necessarily but because it submits political opinion and partisanship to examination and instills in students the necessity of considering that there are perennial human challenges that persist throughout time, including the tribalism that afflicts our society currently, or the democratic tendency towards political equality that breeds the individualism against which Tocqueville warns us. This liberal education that focuses on the great books and ideas of human civilization does not replace the professional practical degrees students need to be economically successful and self-sustaining but it teaches students to think clearly about what a successful civic life and a robust democracy require. This mission is both timeless and contemporary, and can be accomplished in a nonpartisan manner through the learning of political and economic thought and history and the serious study of government and public policy that begins with the study of the foundations of Western Civilization in the works of Plato and Aristotle and extends to Shakespeare and the American founding. Higher education should introduce a conversation that produces not conformity of thought but rather the thoughtful combat of ideas. Only students so equipped will rise to the defense of free speech and the debate of difficult ideas and concepts. It is the answer to

the challenge of our times—the need to provide students with an education that takes them beyond particularized identity and debilitating partisanship to teach them about the content of a serious life as a human being and as a citizen that makes it possible for them to exercise the wisdom and judgment necessary to take the lead in public life.

Notes

1. Kahlenberg and Janey.
2. Fayetteville State University.
3. Kahlenberg and Janey.
4. Among the many books on the subject of American disunity in the early twenty-first century are Haidt; Hochschild; Murray; Brooks; Levin; Vance; and Cowen.
5. Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism.”
6. Ibid.
7. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* 77.
8. The first understanding of the slogan, according to Lilla is “that there are no spheres of life exempt from the struggle for power” (ibid. 75).
9. For these arguments, see, in particular, “The Me Decade and Third Great Awakening” and “Funky Chic” in Wolfe.
10. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* 67.
11. Ibid. 76.
12. Ibid. 67.
13. Ibid. 81–86.
14. Ibid. 113.

15. Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism."
16. Levin 97.
17. Tocqueville 482.
18. Ibid.
19. Levin 147.
20. Ibid. 148.
21. Ibid. 98, 100.
22. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* 88.
23. Abrams, et al.
24. Tocqueville 291.
25. Lincoln.
26. Thomas, "Liberal Education and American Democracy."
27. Pangle and Pangle 150.
28. Thomas, *The Founders and the Idea of a National University* 32–35.
29. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 48.
30. Pangle and Pangle 151.
31. Ibid. 150.
32. Ibid. 147, 149.
33. Jefferson.
34. Ibid.
35. Fayetteville State University.

36. Stanford University.
37. University of Utah.
38. Dewey 19.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. 22–23.
41. Ibid. 51.
42. The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Task Force 1.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid. 3.

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