
IMAGINING DEMOCRATIC FUTURES FOR PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES:
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AGAINST
FATALISM'S TEMPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT. At current rates, almost all U.S. public universities could reach a point of zero state subsidy within the next fifty years. What is a public university without public funding? In this essay, Kathleen Knight Abowitz considers the future of public universities, drawing upon the analysis provided in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Knight Abowitz conducts an initial institutional analysis through two broad prisms: that of the political landscape that authorizes universities as public institutions, and that of the present political-economic context of public education in general and public universities in particular. Dewey's conception of democratic education is then explored; his arguments regarding aims, experience, thinking, and social intelligence provide important tools for imagining the democratic futures of public universities today.

At current rates, almost all U.S. public universities could reach a point of zero state subsidy within the next fifty years.¹ What is a public university without public funding? This essay is about the future of public universities, drawing upon the analysis of democracy and education provided in John Dewey's masterwork of the same name. I first conduct an initial institutional analysis through two broad prisms: that of the political landscape that authorizes universities as public institutions, and that of the present political-economic context of public education in general and public universities in particular. I then turn to Dewey's conception of democratic education; his arguments regarding aims, experience, thinking, and social intelligence provide important tools for imagining the democratic futures of public universities today. While Dewey wrote little that spoke directly to university purpose or governance, *Democracy and Education* provides foundational ideas useful to university educators today. From Dewey's democratic education concept comes the claim defended here that public higher education's possible democratic futures must be powerfully shaped by the voices and perspectives of educators and students, not higher education managers or political governing boards. Higher education's public mission, absent flourishing state support, must be invented and fought for using the kinds of democratic virtues and social intelligence that can be in short supply in university and public life. I defend that thesis and, in the conclusion, describe Dewey's contributions as well as limitations in helping us face the present crisis.

Throughout the essay I take a bifocal approach to the analysis: I shift from the broader, national and transnational conditions shaping public universities

1. Thomas G. Mortenson, "State Funding: A Race to the Bottom," American Council on Education (Winter 2012), <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/state-funding-a-race-to-the-bottom.aspx>.

to the local conditions at my own institution, Miami University.² This is not because my university represents some sort of model empirical point of evidence, although I think our trends are illustrative enough of the larger context. Rather, my methodology is trying to emulate Deweyan forms of inquiry, seeking local understandings and social intelligence through taking a broader, wider view, but then returning to action in our own spheres, with perhaps more points of flexibility than broader analyses might enable us to envision.³ Rather than bringing the critique of the scholar functioning at a distance, I frame the analysis within my present circumstance so as to contribute to the social intelligence we need in order to address our current problems.

My method here is part of my argument. I am both modeling Deweyan philosophical inquiry and advancing it as a means to address the problems of public universities. While I will take stances critical of my institution and its leadership — here lies a fundamental point in my argument — I *am* the institution, and possess agency as a citizen here. As an educator employed with the privilege of tenured status, I am this university and its future, at the present moment. I take this stance because I have a deep regard for the institution, my colleagues, our students, our constituencies, and because my self-interests are intertwined with theirs. I also believe it cheap to blame the phantom of “the institution” as if I was not part of it, indeed one of its beneficiaries. And finally, I take this stance because philosophical problems “arise because of widespread and widely felt difficulties in social practice,” as Dewey notes in the final chapter of *Democracy of Education*.⁴ We ourselves feel the pinch of them in our daily existences, and thus are best qualified to create the social intelligence needed to respond.

THE PUBLIC OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE ELITE-DOMINATED STATE

My university is public, the first founded in the state of Ohio, chartered in 1809 (and on lands formerly belonging to the Myaamia tribe, now of Oklahoma).

2. I also utilize this bifocal conception in Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2012).

3. See Thomas Alexander, “Dewey’s Denotative-Empirical Method: A Thread through the Labyrinth,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2004): 248–56.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 338. This work will be cited in the text as *DE* for all subsequent references. All references to Dewey’s works will be to the multivolume series comprising *The Early Works, 1882–1898*, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, and *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volumes in this series will henceforth be cited as *EW*, *MW*, and *LW*, respectively; for example, the citation “*Democracy and Education* (1916), *MW* 9, 338” indicates that this work appears in *Middle Works* from this series, volume 9, and the discussion or quotation cited is on page 338.

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The idea of “public” preceding “university” describes a type of postsecondary institution linked to the state (government). Public universities have predictable forms. The state authorizes the public university by regulating governance and funding mechanisms. The state supports and shapes the infrastructure of public universities through providing budgetary support. Both these linkages to governmental bodies distinguish the form of public universities from that of other postsecondary institutions. These linkages have shaped the function of public higher education upon its students and communities. Despite being founded on lands taken from the native tribes, public universities like mine have historically been institutions, ideally and sometimes actually, of service to and cultivation of the societies that created them. The creation of new knowledge that benefits the society; the importance of educating America’s next generational leaders; and the mission to extend educational access across classes and groups are prominent reasons why states funded the expanding public university system of the twentieth century.⁵

While historically mixed with private purposes for pursuing a university education, public goals are increasingly on the wane in higher education. One reason is the larger political climate in the United States and globally. The broader democratic structures in which public higher education now operates reflect an “economic elite domination,” according to authors of a 2014 article in which a large data set of longitudinal policy preferences among diverse voters showed clearly that “average citizens’ preferences ... have essentially zero estimated impact upon policy change, while economic elites are still estimated to have a very large, positive, independent impact.”⁶ Assessing such trends, progressive editorialists see democracy weakening. “Put together our 1 percent elections, the privatization of our government, the de-legitimization of Congress and the presidency, as well as the empowerment of the national security state and the US military ... and you have something like a new ballgame.”⁷ Public higher education policies, it can easily be argued, no longer necessarily reflect the interests of the average voter but more often the interests of economic elites and organized interest groups; the public aims of higher education have become increasingly privatized. While the United States has never truly had a “public university” system in the same way that other industrialized nation-states have accomplished by providing no-cost higher education to citizens, public universities have for most

5. A recent essay by David Labaree cautions against a romantic longitudinal view of higher education’s history. Labaree argues that America’s view of higher education as a public good was only promoted and widely accepted from around 1940–1970, during the postwar interim. Before and since, Labaree states, higher education has largely been thought to be a private good. See David F. Labaree, “An Affair to Remember: America’s Brief Fling with the University as a Public Good,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 50, no. 1 (2016): 20–36.

6. Martin Gilens and Benjamin R. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 575.

7. Tom Englehardt, “Is a New Political System Emerging in this Country?,” *Moyers and Company* (March 25, 2015), <http://billmoyers.com/2015/03/25/new-american-order/>.

of their historical tenure enjoyed healthy state support that allowed them to keep tuition costs relatively low and affordable. As state funding diminishes today, costs are passed on to the student through tuition and fees. Higher education is rapidly becoming a consumer good, whether obtained at a public university or any other kind of postsecondary institution. This trend lines up with the new political-economic forms and structures in this late capitalist era. While always attended by students with a mix of private and public motivations, higher education today is more driven than ever before by pursuit of extrinsic material rewards — and, perhaps instrumentally speaking, logically so given the great cost involved.

Given present funding trends, Ohio will stop funding public universities altogether in 2039.⁸ In retrenchment since the year 2000, my university currently receives about 9.6 percent of its operating funds from the state.⁹ Since 2008, Ohio has cut public higher education expenditures by 28.9 percent.¹⁰ If measured from 1984 to 2014, the average published tuition price that students pay at public universities in the United States has increased by 225 percent.¹¹ In addition, our state has mandated performance-based funding, linking financial support to achieved results such as retention and graduation rates. Like all public universities, mine has become more tuition-dependent; we accept more out-of-state and nondomestic students than we did a decade ago, as these students bring more tuition dollars with them.¹² In addition, other changes on campus signal a shedding of public identity and mission. We have gotten rid of our public radio station; our community credit union was asked to move off campus; our arts building where town citizens could pay \$10 to use pottery wheels and kilns was closed to use by community members.

All these facts reveal our morphing status as a public university, true of universities in many states and countries across the globe.¹³ The form of Miami University looks more like a private university, and form typically goes hand in hand with function; we increasingly boast of our “return on investment” measure

8. Mortenson, “State Funding: A Race to the Bottom.”

9. University Budget Office, “2014–2015 Operating Budget, Miami University” (November 18, 2014), <http://www.units.miamioh.edu/bpa/Budget%20Web%20Contents-042610/4-Budget%20Docs-Fourth%20Page/2-Budget%20Book/FY15%20Operating%20Budget%20Book.pdf>.

10. Jordan Weissman, “A Truly Devastating Graph on State Higher Education Spending,” *Atlantic*, March 20, 2013; <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/03/a-truly-devastating-graph-on-state-higher-education-spending/274199/>.

11. “Trends in Higher Education: Average Rates of Growth of Published Charges,” *College Board*, <http://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/average-rates-growth-published-charges-decade>.

12. See Ozan Jacquette and Bradley R. Curs, “Creating the Out-of-State University: Do Public Universities Increase Nonresident Freshman Enrollment in Response to Declining State Appropriations?,” *Research in Higher Education* 56, no. 6 (2015): 535–65.

13. Jos Boys, “New Patterns of Public and Private Competition and Collaboration,” in *Building Better Universities: Strategies, Spaces, Technologies* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

as a quality of our degree. In our branding we claim the name “public” like a badge of honor, but only insofar as we insert “ivy” after the term. As a “public ivy” my institutional public relations staff hope to make hay out of a trope (“public”) that combines the highest democratic ideals of public education, with the all of the elitism and gate-keeping functions (“ivy”) built into selective U.S. postsecondary institutions like ours.¹⁴ In one fell swoop of branding magic, my institution signals both the pride of status and economic desperation felt in the plight of public universities today.

In times like these, there is no shortage of analysis available about the future of the public university in democratic nation–states. Much of this analysis is necessarily bracing in the wake-up calls it offers to higher education faculty, but also troubling for its dystopic fatalism.

In his classic *University in Ruins*, posthumously published in 1996, postmodern humanities scholar Bill Readings analyzes the contemporary university with surprising foresight.¹⁵ Long before the words “neoliberal” became common parlance among scholars and leftist intellectuals, Readings declared that the university’s historic mission of advancing the culture and knowledge of the nation–state has ended. In its place, we have the university as transnational bureaucratic corporation that pursues “excellence” in all things. Of course, “excellence” long ago became an empty signifier. The university as an idea is in ruins, Readings suggests, and we are living and working in those ruins every day. “The wider social role of the University ... is now up for grabs.”¹⁶

Educational philosopher David Blacker, author of *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, believes our fate is decided.¹⁷ Blacker examines the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as described by Marx and uses this concept to analyze the structural crisis of capitalism and, by extension, education. The austerity for all public institutions produced by capitalism’s contemporary and permanent crisis is not merely a phase through which we will pass. Rather, we are currently experiencing a state of what Blacker calls “eliminationism, whereby increasing segments of the population are morally written off as no longer exploitable and hence irrelevant to capital accumulation.”¹⁸ Resource depletion on the planet combined with late capitalist political economy yield an alienated humanity, reflected perfectly in educational policy and conditions.

Blacker argues that, as the rate of profit falls across the economy, the falling rate of learning is its equivalent, and capitalism’s neoliberal phase savages educational

14. Jolyn Brand, “What Are the Public Ivies?,” *Brand College Consulting*, August 11, 2014, <https://brandcollegeconsulting.com/what-are-the-public-ivies/>.

15. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16. *Ibid.*, 2.

17. David J. Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame* (Washington DC: Zero Books, 2013).

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

investments and infrastructure as a result. Eliminationism in education is revealed in the privatization of K–16 schooling as well as in the problem of student loan debt in higher education. It is revealed in our massive prison–industrial complex that serves as a holding tank for seemingly undesirable segments of the population, and in the increasingly repressive conditions for genuine education in public schools. Blacker predicts an extreme amount of social volatility in our futures, though admits that there is no predicting exactly when this will happen or how this will look. Blacker’s bracing analysis forces readers to grapple with the possibility that the state’s withdrawal of financial support for public universities will not reverse itself in any meaningful way in our lifetimes or perhaps ever.¹⁹

Part of the volatility Blacker predicts may be seen in the area of public university governance. A governor-appointed board of regents or trustees governs public universities in the United States. As scholar of university governance C. Judson King explains:

Appointments ... are commonly made through a variety of criteria that do not prominently include in-depth knowledge of the university system at hand or even of higher education. ... Appointments may also have elements of political payback. More often than not, members of such boards are not themselves graduates or long-time supporters of the institution. Public boards meet in public settings, with media attention, public-comment periods, an inherently political environment, and often much public coverage and interest.²⁰

A portrait of troubling university governance trends can be seen in Wisconsin, Illinois, and North Carolina, where senior officials or governing boards are intervening in new ways that weaken faculty authority. In Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker signed a budget bill into law in July 2015 that cut \$250 million from the University of Wisconsin system. By March 2015 Wisconsin legislators had also changed state law to make it easier to fire tenured professors at state institutions.²¹ In 2014, senior officials at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign blocked the appointment of Stephen Salaita, who was to have joined the American Indian Studies program, over Salaita’s Twitter comments about the Israeli occupation of Gaza. Department heads, in response, wrote an open letter to the new campus president expressing concern over their potential to maintain their high standards as a research institution in a climate where faculty “can no longer trust that this university will honor the principles of faculty decision-making, free speech, and

19. This prediction is shared by many who study public higher education today. While a zero state subsidy is not necessarily in our future in a literal sense, public higher education is a “discretionary” part of state budgets and even though many states have experienced economic recoveries since 2008, these cuts have not been restored in most states.

20. C. Judson King, “Board Governance of Public University Systems: Stresses and Needs,” *Center for Studies in Higher Education* (Berkeley: University of California, November 2012), 3; <http://www.cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/board-governance-public-university-systems-stresses-and-needs>.

21. Colleen Flaherty, “Losing Hope in Wisconsin,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/05/faculty-members-protest-tenure-shared-governance-changes-board-regents>. See also Nicholas Hillman, “Why Wisconsin Matters to You,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/06/05/move-undermine-tenure-wisconsin-has-national-implications-essay>.

freedom to conduct research."²² At the University of North Carolina, President Tom Ross was fired by the board of governors for no reason that anyone can publicly produce, and that same board has eliminated three of UNC's academic centers: one related to the environment, one related to voter engagement, and one related to poverty, work, and opportunity. This last of the three centers is surmised to have been the board's true target, as its leader has been an outspoken critic of the state legislature's policies regarding the poor.²³ Margaret Spellings, former U.S. Education Secretary under George W. Bush, has been appointed to replace Ross.²⁴

These incidents are part of a trend in which public university external governing boards are exercising greater control over hiring, curriculum, and administrative functions at the university. Declining public trust, increasing public accountability, diminished public resources, and a more divisively politicized environment in state legislatures have helped to morph governance at public universities. Faculty governance, in a context of declining numbers of full-time tenured faculty, has also diminished in scope and power. Larry Gerber asserts that today, "the system of shared governance in which faculty have played a significant role in academic decision making is being challenged by critics who argue that more businesslike methods are necessary" so that American colleges and universities can become more "flexible" and "nimble" in responding to changing market demands and new technologies.²⁵

At my own institution, we have not seen anything so interventionist from our board as have educators in Wisconsin or North Carolina. We have, however, seen the trends toward institutional efficiency, revenue generation, and diminishment of faculty governance processes. In our latest strategic plan, a top-down initiative strongly shaped by our board of regents, multiple objectives demonstrate these trends. Under the first major goal, objective 2 seeks to "recognize and reward Miami employees for increasing effectiveness and productivity by using their expertise, creativity, and collaboration to constantly improve accountability, productivity, and efficient use of resources." Objective 3 seeks to increase response time and the university's "ability to make timely decisions." Objective 4 "incentivizes new revenue streams, reallocates resources, and promotes team-oriented

22. "Open Letter on the Salaita Case from University of Illinois Department Heads," *Academe Blog*, December 4, 2014, <https://academeblog.org/2014/12/02/open-letter-on-the-salaita-case-from-university-of-illinois-department-heads/>.

23. Jedediah Purdy, "Ayn Rand comes to U.N.C.," *New Yorker*, March 19, 2015; <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/new-politics-at-the-university-of-north-carolina>.

24. Associated Press, "Former Bush Education Chief Spellings to Lead UNC System," *New York Times*, October 23, 2015. See also Jane Stancill, "Tom Ross Era Ends for 17 UNC Campuses," *Raleigh News and Observer*, January 1, 2016, <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article52658555.html>.

25. Larry G. Gerber, *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

solutions to fiscal challenges."²⁶ My institution's trends follow the ways in which governing boards are demanding a more efficient (less inclusive and deliberative) decision-making process by educators, and are shortening the distance that formerly separated them from internal matters of administrative process, faculty governance, and curriculum.

All these changes in public higher education have set up a kind of professional crisis among faculty and staff in our institutions. And even these categories themselves are changing rapidly, as part-time faculty ranks grow and full-time administrative staff numbers at many universities have also expanded. We face a crisis in which educators of all kinds are less and less able to guide and shape the education that they are hired to create for and with students, set in a larger privatizing context for public universities in which educational purposes and functions are subordinate to market pressures and logic.

How should educators respond? In the face of crisis, fatalism is strangely comforting. Narrative fatalism and compartmentalized pessimism are the recommendations Blacker offers educators.²⁷ We are "fated in a certain direction," toward a certain kind of story about the crisis of capitalism and its effects on public university education.²⁸ That story has a predictable ending that in large part, Blacker says, we cannot alter. Eliminationist capitalism will run its course and educational activism designed to bring about social justice in the face of this is futile. Blacker recommends contained and focused pessimism about this general story in which we find ourselves as an entirely sensible reaction to our circumstance.

Deweyan conceptions of democracy, education, inquiry, and social intelligence might suggest an alternative path to Blacker's. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes, "We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one" (*DE*, 88). The analysis provided by Blacker, Readings, and others of the present condition of public educational institutions do us the favor of bringing into sharp relief our circumstances today. They help us understand the need to imagine public universities as functioning more and more apart from the state's official sponsorship. Dewey's pragmatic political philosophy provides helpful analysis for this present condition: democracy, for Dewey, is not merely a "form" of government; it is a way of living. As Chris Higgins and I have maintained,

Some may want to argue that government sponsorship is a necessary condition for a school's being public, but the sad state of our current civic life after a century and a half of the common school proves that it is not a sufficient condition. Moreover, if democracy is, as John Dewey famously argued, not merely a set of political devices but "a mode of associated living," then there is a further problem we need to explore. Democracy requires not procedures for

26. "University Objectives and Metrics," Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 2015, <http://miamioh.edu/2020plan/university-level-plan/goal-1/index.html>.

27. Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, 345–55.

28. *Ibid.*, 235.

maintaining neutrality on value-laden issues, but citizens who can exercise the democratic virtues.²⁹

Dewey's notion of democracy does not technically require a particular form of government sponsorship, but a certain type of functionality, of purpose. Educators must direct that purpose — indeed, help to reconstruct the public mission of their own institutions — with the kinds of democratic virtues and social intelligence that can be in short supply in university and public life. While Deweyan democratic education and action cannot “cure” the effects of late capitalism on education, it can draw our attention to concrete elements of democratic change possible in local contexts. Blacker examines the broad structure and workings of the political economy of late capitalism and finds no possibility of changing the course, no indication that any action we can take will make any difference, because capitalism's end game is decided. This stance smacks of a perfectionism, that if you cannot totally right the entire political-economic ship, you should not be involved in working on a solution at all. This perfectionism also suggests that the political-economic boat is one large ship rather than an ecology of universes that we inhabit, comprised of complex combinations of state laws, public university systems, citizens, families, and students. This is precisely where the bifocal methodology I use here (adapted from a Deweyan denotative empiricism) helps us: by examining these problems from both structural views and our particular experiences more finely attuned to local contexts, we can construct opportunities for democratic interventions and shifts in institutional direction that can make a great deal of difference for students, faculty, and other public university constituencies experiencing these events in the here and now.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND DEMOCRATIC PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

Dewey wrote relatively little about universities or higher education in his lifetime. Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett argue that Dewey's work on education gives “remarkably little attention to the role of universities,” which the authors claim “prevented him from ever developing the comprehensive strategy necessary to” realize his democratic vision.³⁰ Any wish for a Deweyan “comprehensive strategy” for universities misunderstands the role of philosophy. I agree with Blacker's observation, “better that one should be disappointed by a philosopher than ... one should ‘follow’ one.”³¹ Frankly, Dewey could scarcely have imagined what public universities face today. So while the authors of *Dewey's Dream* critique him for his failure to discuss the importance of universities, it is incumbent upon us to bring a creative, interpretive spirit to his texts in order to

29. Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “What Makes a Public School Public? A Framework for Evaluating the Civic Substance of Schooling,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 368.

30. Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 22.

31. Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, 58.

extract what may be relevant. Dewey's *Democracy and Education* has important relevance for the questions of the future of public universities.

Already revealed in this analysis is Dewey's notion of democracy as a form of associated living, the idea that democracy is something more than the formal mechanisms of mass democracy such as voting in elections and representative governance structures. As a way of life, democracy requires more than predictable mechanisms, since mechanisms will change with the times; it requires a certain type of education and intelligence among its citizens. In the public university, this education must be primarily shaped by educators who are clear-eyed, determined meliorists, who situate curriculum in student inquiry and experience that is designed to lead students toward more sophisticated forms of social intelligence.

EDUCATIONAL AIMS

Higher education's aims have heavily focused on the reproduction of the leadership class, with a particular focus — at various intervals in its history — on god, reason, and culture. Colleges in colonial America were primarily vehicles for the Christian church to train its leadership and cultivate Christian morality. Universities also were born of Enlightenment rationalism, and they serve an additional function of conserving the cultural knowledge of the society and, in so doing, building national character. The university's more utilitarian function of producing socially useful scientific, secular kinds of knowledge (for example, industrial, agricultural, and mechanical) was firmly established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as policies like the Morrill Land Grant Act (1890) established state-sponsored, public university systems and the GI Bill (1944) greatly expanded access to them.

Today, vocational aims have overtaken all these as the primary individual and social utilitarian function of education, including higher education. With a new seeming consensus of purpose, the external political and financial pressures on public higher education have led to the increasing scrutiny of educational aims. In an ironic twist during an era of diminishing state support, the public university's function has never in its history been so tightly monitored and scrutinized by government. Because a university degree is now a consumable good, assessment policies seek to provide taxpayers with determinations of degree value.

In higher education circles, there is something of a feeding frenzy surrounding the issue of assessment. The federal government, due to release a proposed rating system ... , wants assessments to create ways to allow one to compare colleges and universities that provide "value"; accrediting organizations want assessments of student learning outcomes; state agencies want assessments to prove that tax dollars are being spent efficiently; institutions want internal assessments that they can use to demonstrate success to their own constituencies.³²

At my own university the laser focus on "student learning outcomes" and the required annual assessments to measure achievement of such outcomes now

32. Christopher B. Nelson, "Assessing Assessment," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 24, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/24/essay-criticizes-state-assessment-movement-higher-education>.

represent a significant part of the faculty and administrative workload. Student learning outcomes on course syllabi and for academic programs are to be written using action words that are easily measurable for these reasons. To a layperson's understanding of teaching and learning, this may make perfect sense: how can you teach something to students if you don't know what you're intending on teaching them?

In *Democracy and Education* Dewey writes about the aims of education. He explains aims in terms of foresight, that which enables one to imagine consequences of actions and thus helps adjust and guide activity. The aim guides one in reaching steps toward the end goal by (1) helping observe given and present conditions in which the action is unfolding, (2) suggesting a proper order or sequencing of actions, and (3) helping to choose among alternative courses of action (*DE*, 104–09). The aim of the heart surgeon is not merely to “give Patient X a triple bypass.” To study the anatomy of the healthy body or the types of cardiac disease a body might suffer can help the surgeon to have general aims when planning a surgical procedure on one's heart. But to open a human body and then adjust aims based on an assessment of current conditions in an actual, living body, with not simply a cardiac system but an interweaving of multiple living systems, is not a linear, externally determined task that can be done ahead of time in any singular fashion. The aim for the surgeon consists actually of multiple aims, under flexible adjustment relative to the observed and changing conditions of the actual body on the table, before, during, and after the surgery. And,

It is the same with the educator, whether parent or teacher. It is as absurd for the latter to set up his “own” aims as the proper objects of the growth of the children as it would be for the farmer to set up an ideal of farming irrespective of conditions. Aims means acceptance of responsibility for the observations, anticipations, and arrangements required in carrying on a function — whether farming or educating. Any aim is of value so far as it assists observation, choice, and planning in carrying on activity from moment to moment and hour to hour; if it gets in the way of the individual's own common sense (as it will surely do if imposed from without or accepted on authority) it does harm. (*DE*, 114)

Educational aims that are precisely and externally set up ahead of time, with accreditation plans and directives from governance bodies, will certainly harm the quality of educational experiences. A quality educational experience can be organized and shaped ahead of time; planning is of course a key component in the organization of teaching and learning. But only educators can set “true” aims, defined by Dewey as those that connect directly and immediately to the actions of learners as they are undergoing an educative experience. Educators are the primary and most important “curators of experience” for student learning.³³ Governing boards do have a distinct role to play. They can help provide broad goals for education, articulate orienting purposes, and attend to institutional accountability for educational aims that are rigorous, addressing relevant outcomes for students and linking up with citizens' goals for public higher education. These boards cannot,

33. I have borrowed this phrase from Jay W. Roberts, *Experiential Education in the College Context: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

however, set *aims* in advance of the educational experience transpiring between students and teachers. These boards must rightly protect the role of faculty in the “acceptance of responsibility for the observations, anticipations, and arrangements required in carrying on a function” like higher learning and inquiry (*DE*, 114).

INQUIRY, EXPERIENCE, AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

While the missions of research and public service have in the past led public universities to tout student engagement as a priority, reconstructing and renewing our commitment to student inquiry and experiential education is a key task ahead. “The Engaged University” is a tag line that universities such as mine have used to idealize an ethic of public service among students and faculty, to counter the reputation of academic departments as “intellectually isolated, jargon-ridden, and un-public-minded,”³⁴ and to counter the university’s image as an ivory tower. My university has two regional campuses, whose distinct missions were historically more locally defined for students pursuing associate degrees and matriculating to the four-year campus. We have partnerships with schools, hospitals, social service agencies, and a host of other non- and for-profit institutions around our region. We take students on study trips to all corners of the globe, where they examine conditions of ecosystems, poverty, the arts, and business. Like Dewey’s Laboratory School, educational institutions link learning with social purpose.

The democratic futures at public universities very much depend on their leadership understanding these linkages with less sentimentality, and beyond any simplistic public relations appeal. Meaningful, reciprocal linkages with social networks, institutions, and public projects of various kinds will be a key component of how future public universities define and measure their public function and impact. The “meaning” that is derived from these linkages does not begin in our service missions, however, but in Dewey’s idea of higher learning itself.

In a very useful analysis, Leonard Waks traces Dewey’s theory of inquiry to help us understand the unique role of the university. Waks’s article, titled “Experimentalism and the Higher Learning,” discusses Dewey’s three stages of inquiry.³⁵ The first stage is a problematic situation, a disequilibrium, a conflict; the second stage is fact gathering and interpretation around the problem, so as to map the problem’s parts and analyze the connections between them, rendering a judgment that allows the imagination of interventions. “In the third stage this judgment is carried back into the field of action,” or as Waks clarifies, “In what may be called the first law of experimental logic is that the context of verification

34. Harry Boyte and Eric Fretz, “Civic Professionalism,” in *“To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education*, ed. John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 94.

35. Leonard Waks, “Experimentalism and the Higher Learning” (paper presented to the Dewey Special Interest Group at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, 1997), https://www.academia.edu/11688441/experimentalism_and_the_higher_learning_john_dewey_s_theory_of_the_university.

lies outside stage two or the internal context of inquiry proper.³⁶ Waks reminds us that universities are key public institutions because higher learning demands “a context of verification,” or in less positivist terms, a “collaboration between specialist experts and non-scholars to put the cumulative knowledge product to an appropriate test as an instrument for everyday problem-solving.”³⁷ The knowledge created by students and professors, researchers and scientists and their student protégés, must be reconnected to the social landscapes where they originated, translated to bridge back into the objective conditions of lived social reality.

While all thinking results in knowledge, ultimately the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking. For we live not in a settled and finished world, but in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective, and where retrospect — and all knowledge as distinct from thought is retrospect — is of value in the solidity, security, and fertility it affords our dealings with the future. (*DE*, 158)

Though “learning to think” is something important at all levels of education, the public university is a key place for its maturation. For it is preparing students to navigate these lived social realities — these “dealings with the future”— that forms the purpose of higher education, as the thinking required of today’s college graduates is enormously complex and extends well beyond the focus on vocation or career alone. Problems related to ecosystems and natural resources, deadly transnational political strife, human health and wellness, divided and unequal societies, and violence are all facing future generations. Inquiry, experience, and thinking form the bridge between the university as an institution where specialized inquiry and thinking can occur, and the social contexts in which universities exist and derive their mission.

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE: EDUCATION AS “SOCIAL PROGRESS”

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues against an individualist notion of education and mind. The source of this individualist conception is relatively modern, a Western Enlightenment reaction “against authority in all spheres of life, the intensity of the struggle, against great odds, for freedom of action and inquiry, [which] led to such an emphasis upon personal observations and ideas as in effect to isolate mind, and set it apart from the world to be known” (*DE*, 301–02). Certainly this isolationist view of mind helped to shape the university’s ivory tower epistemologies and the legacies of these in our current practices.

Rather than an individualistic notion of intelligence divorced from both a social and moral sensibility, Dewey’s theory of social intelligence is a key concept for public university educators to understand and cultivate. “Intelligence is a social asset,” as Dewey wrote much later in his life.³⁸ Social intelligence fosters the development of publics, essential for democratic futures, to cultivate citizens who have the capacity to think, reason, deliberate, and act with foresight and wisdom.

36. *Ibid.*, 7.

37. *Ibid.*, 10.

38. John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1937), *LW* 11, 48.

Reconstructing the purposes of public university education will importantly link learning and knowledge creation to the habits and capacities of social intelligence, not merely individual intellectual growth.

Exemplars of this kind come from the civic engagement movement, educators who work collaboratively with community partners to create a curriculum that helps students become problem solvers in communities. In "Civic Professionalism," Harry Boyte and Eric Fretz call for a new university culture that educates civic professionals rather than technically sound but communally deaf accountants, educators, nurses, and engineers.³⁹ Boyte and Fretz cite examples where university teachers and students participate as community organizers, in effect. These models show how professionals can create public knowledge through linking "professional inquiry and local knowledge" to "develop systems of communication and knowledge production that involve laypeople in the solution of public problems."⁴⁰

Such social intelligence must cross national borders, too. International networks related to global challenges have spawned research and learning collaboratives in higher education. The International Alliance of Research Universities, with eighteen member universities across five continents, has set up an International Scientific Congress on Climate Change as well as a Sustainability Congress, sharing and collaborating on research projects relating to "aging, longevity and health, global security, and sustainable cities."⁴¹

New partnerships and opportunities to link with social problems must be fought for and prioritized by educators across the public university. These partnerships and programs will look different on different campuses, as they will be organically built through regional and other partnerships that are in some ways unique to the communities and contexts in which different public universities are situated. These must not be seen as fluffy public relations efforts, but as emerging from the very theories of learning and knowledge production that drive our work.

THE EDUCATOR'S STANCE OF MELIORISM, NOT PERFECTIONISM; THE ORGANIZER, NOT THE UTOPIAN

"Meliorism is the view that it is both a logical and moral error to declare that life — presently or ultimately — is either perfectly good or bad; life should be understood as *improvable*, primarily through intelligent, human effort."⁴² Such a stance offers a starting point for philosophical analysis in this age of public education in late capitalism. Steven Fesmire points out that Dewey's is a particular sort of radicalism; it is a radicalism originating in democracy's requirement of

39. Boyte and Fretz, "Civic Professionalism."

40. *Ibid.*, 97.

41. Boys, *Building Better Universities*, 85.

42. David Hildebrand, "Dewey's Pragmatism: Instrumentalism and Meliorism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 59.

“great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural.”⁴³ This description combines the radical nature of Dewey’s democratic ethic with the maturity required for executing it with diverse collaborators across the imperfect spaces and times in which we exist.

To appreciate how we must build understanding of our shared educational purposes across the public university context, a different set of habits must be developed among higher educators. In particular, I fear that the habits of the tenured faculty member at public universities — dwindling species though we are — are not easily conducive to participation in or leadership of these kinds of change efforts. Our relative isolation and autonomy, at least historically, were created conditions related to the ivory tower epistemologies that shaped the university’s existence. Universities used to exist within a sanctioned barrier between the world of knowledge creation and the external messiness of the so-called “real world.” Mostly for the good, these barriers are gone, but many of the habits they cultivated among academics remain (as well as the reward structures in promotion and tenure processes that incentivize these habits). Among these is, at times, inflexibility and idealism that together can work against the kind of melioristic, antiperfectionist stance necessary to the work of reconstructing the university’s public purpose. Reconceptualizing public university missions and structures requires a great deal of bridge building and coalitional cooperation among different disciplines, subject areas, and domains, including university and community. Our ivory tower hothouses have, for generations, fostered some of these habits that, while perhaps useful in another age, are often better suited to imagining utopias rather than organizing diverse coalitions toward some broadly shared public end goals.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

The public university form is breaking in terms of how it has been historically envisioned and created. In real terms, Dewey offers us no prescription for this crisis. The ideal of democracy as we understood it from a liberal constitutional democracy during the modern capitalist era, made possible by the expansion of the capitalist manufacturing economy during that period, is dying. Hopefully it is a form being born anew, though Blacker’s arguments are useful insofar as they dash any easy hopes for such a rebirth. New (and multiple) configurations of the public university must be born now, and formed around collective leadership models that are newly emerging to replace older cultural forms of leadership. As a tenured faculty member, as a department chair, as a long-time member of my professional, university, and town communities, I possess forms of institutional capital and that capital is expanded when I join with others to make change. As William Plater argues, collective leadership in higher education

emerges out of an infrastructure when one or more of the infrastructure participants set goals and define strategies without waiting for or asking the permission of the CEO or CAO. It is in this sense that collective leadership is a “conspiracy” of the concerned individuals because it

43. John Dewey, “Democracy Is Radical” (1937), *LW* 11, 298–99, quoted in Steven Fesmire, *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 160.

is unauthorized or unrecognized. It does not depend on the formal leadership to proceed or to succeed. It does not ask permission out of a realization that a negative response would preclude or limit the range of action. It is collective because success depends on the participation — witting or unwitting — of many, if not all, of the people who are in the infrastructure.⁴⁴

Scholars, artists, and educators from all disciplines and fields, from across the educational landscape of postsecondary education, must help create the future of the university that serves public aims and purposes. This new public postsecondary institution will take many forms, and it will be funded and accessed by students in multiple different ways. Each institution must uniquely fit its constituencies and unique circumstances. But in all cases, we educators must invent it; it will not likely come from the tops of our institutions but from within the ranks of them.

Fatalism and pessimism hamper the spirit of invention and imagination that we so sorely need at this moment. The existential gap of fatalism is educative, momentarily, but a luxury we can ill afford to dwell within for too long.⁴⁵ This is not naïve “hope” but our historical reality: small groups of citizens have acted against great forces to break oppressive or unworkable political structures in the past, and will do so again. Fatalism impedes our ability to make that difficult choice. Within that democracy of association is a realistic hope that we might develop democratic futures for public universities.

These democratic futures may not look like a “system” of public postsecondary institutions of the type to which we have become accustomed. Indeed, absent any public funding, our university landscape will change dramatically, and likely not for the better in many senses. There will be less access for the lower and middle classes, less quality overall. While this article uses the zero-public-funding scenario as a thought experiment to examine what qualities contribute mightily to a public university mission and education, public university education obviously still depends on government support.

These times demand that we reexamine our democratic faiths. One of the progressive’s most holy tenets is education-as-panacea.⁴⁶ We Deweyans must keep alive democratic faith even as we shatter naïve faith in education as a grand solution to every kind of problem. Dewey’s own work in political theory as well as philosophy offers precious little in terms of the direction political organizing and change strategies might take in order to realize democratic ideals.

In this era, public educational systems will not be returning to some grand modernist utopia that never was, universities included. Some of our public universities are finding and will find ways to reimagine their public missions and

44. William M. Plater, “Collective Leadership for Engagement: Reclaiming the Public Purpose of Higher Education,” in *To Serve a Larger Purpose*, ed. Saltmarsh and Hartley, 113.

45. See Peter Levine, “Against Fatalism: Responding to Krugman and Sunstein,” *Peter Levine* (blog), April 6, 2015, <http://peterlevine.ws/?p=15088>.

46. Blacker takes aim at “education-as-panacea” in the last chapter of *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*.

projects. They will do so only with civic-minded educational leaders (both those in formal leadership roles and, more importantly, those doing informal leadership work across institutional sectors) who understand democracy as a process, a way of living, and a means of education, requiring faith and courage. As Dewey wrote in 1944,

Democracy is not an easy road to take and follow. On the contrary, it is as far as its realization is concerned in the complex conditions of the contemporary world a supremely difficult one. Upon the whole we are entitled to take courage from the fact that it has worked as well as it has done. But to this courage we must add, if our courage is to be intelligent rather than blind, the fact that successful maintenance of democracy demands the utmost in use of the best available methods to procure a social knowledge that is reasonably commensurate with our physical knowledge, and the invention and use of forms of social engineering reasonably commensurate with our technological abilities in physical affairs.⁴⁷

47. John Dewey, "The Democratic Faith and Education" (1944), *LW* 15, 259–60.

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