

RICHARD GUARASCI

# Anchoring Democracy

## The Civic Imperative for Higher Education

FEATURED TOPIC

**In economically challenged communities, institutions that are “anchored” in place can serve as strategic partners with sizable material assets and significant social capital**

AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES are facing a civic imperative. The nation is floundering, if not unwinding. We are living through another historical moment best described by the late Richard Hofstadter as part of “the paranoid style in American politics.”<sup>1</sup> Nativism, racism, anti-immigration, and anti-intellectualism are its staples. Its origins date from the founding of the republic, and it has reappeared in the current resurrection of white supremacy. This paranoid style of American politics swells during periods of significant social change to established racial

and class hierarchies. This is where we find ourselves now.

Since Franklin and Jefferson expressed their founding visions of higher learning as critical for engaged citizens and a stable republic,

American colleges and universities have enacted an enduring commitment to preparing knowledgeable citizens and leaders. In the past, this has simply meant teaching the practices of citizenship; today, it involves building civic competencies through active engagement of students, faculty, and staff as participants in democratic culture. Now more than ever, this commitment is not only necessary for an effective democracy—it is imperative.

Democracies are vulnerable social constructions. They flourish in eras of social consensus and economic prosperity, when citizens believe in the prospect of brighter futures. They stumble, if not decay, during times of harsh economic downturn, deep social conflict, and political atrophy. The United States is not immune from these challenges, as was painfully

illustrated by its Civil War, the inevitable result of the fundamental contradiction between its commitment to liberty and equality and its reliance on slavery and class subordination. While political movements have challenged racial and socioeconomic hierarchies, racism and economic inequality are currently ascending throughout American life alongside attempts to subordinate women, immigrants, and others. White supremacist organizations are now active and public, seemingly fortified by the presence, rhetoric, and actions of certain leaders in the executive, legislative, and judicial corridors of federal power.

While the specter of white supremacist demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting “you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us” is a stunning example of this renewed nativism, the deeper effects of racial and class hierarchies are found in the everyday realities of our local communities. Institutional racism and social inequality are lived every day in our schools, hospitals, streets, and, most vividly, our prisons. Consider the following facts: Students who are not on the third-grade reading level by the end of that grade year are unlikely to graduate high school; those youngsters below this benchmark constitute 63 percent of all high school nongraduates. Among fourth-grade students, 74 percent who demonstrate the lowest levels of reading proficiency come from low-income families, and roughly 50 percent of black and 47 percent of Latino students have below-basic reading skills. Low-income youths are thirteen times less likely than their peers from other income groups to graduate from high school. And here is the rub: more than 70 percent of all prison inmates in the United States read at a fourth-grade level or below. In short, reading is destiny for low-income children, particularly those of color. These statistics challenge our national narrative of individual merit and social mobility, suggesting that race, ethnicity, and

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Wagner College

class status in early childhood determine the large majority of the remainder of one's life.<sup>2</sup>

For the last decade, several colleges and universities have aimed to address rising inequality by establishing sustainable partnerships with their local neighborhoods. Serving as anchor institutions committed to strategic civic engagement, they have attempted to address the coefficients of inequality that limit educational and economic opportunities, building communities while educating citizens. Evolving from earlier efforts focused on volunteerism and community service (begun in earnest with the founding of Campus Compact in the late 1980s) and service learning (which emerged in the 1990s), anchor institutions have adopted a larger institutional role under the banner of civic engagement. Conceived of by Ira Harkavy and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, the anchor institution model involves reciprocal neighborhood

partnerships that increase community prosperity while strengthening the civic missions and practices of universities and colleges.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, in economically challenged communities, institutions that are “anchored” in

place—colleges and universities, but also hospitals, elementary and secondary schools, churches, and others—can serve as strategic partners with sizable material assets and significant social capital.

For colleges and universities, anchor partnerships can involve attacking social inequalities related to differential reading levels among elementary school students, mentoring middle and high school students, building college readiness, assisting families with health services, providing key assets and expertise that advance economic development, supporting new immigrants, and using the arts and humanities to tell rich community stories. These practices, focused on addressing racial, ethnic, and class inequalities, merge higher education's civic work and our country's struggle for equality into a larger project of building a fairer and more just democratic social order.

#### **The civic role of higher education**

Universities and colleges are fundamentally dedicated to the discovery, creation, and dissemination of knowledge. From the founding of the American republic to the present moment,

they have honored two related goals, advancing both the individual learner and the civic prosperity of the larger society. Higher education institutions have long educated students for personal advancement by broadening their knowledge of the world and by offering preparation for future careers; they have advanced society by creating knowledge and by educating learners about their responsibilities as engaged citizens. Colleges and universities perceive themselves as, and have been broadly considered, necessary agents for individual social mobility and engines of progress powering a vibrant democracy and a prosperous economic system.

Today, this narrative is subject to serious and dangerous interrogation, if not subversion, in the face of the anti-intellectualism at the core of the new nativism. For a significant sector of American society, all authority is suspect, including the authority conferred by the scientific method of evidence-based argument. Scientific findings are cast aside when they challenge ideological positions. Reason is perceived as a suspect political tool employed in the service of oppositional agendas. Fear and paranoia are twined to racial, ethnic, and related phobias. In this environment, higher learning is not perceived as a public good, but rather as a political instrument of entrenched elites. Given this social dynamic, colleges and universities must reintroduce themselves as positive contributors to economic progress, civic prosperity, and a more fair, just, and inclusive social order.

The renewal of higher learning must begin with the reestablishment of its civic mission—a mission not limited to civic engagement, but embedded within the essential aim of liberal education: namely, the development of independent and critical thinkers. A liberally educated person is able to construct and effectively communicate cogent arguments based on objective evidence. Such a person possesses active listening skills, intellectual curiosity, a knowledge of the scientific method, and an understanding of diverse cultures and value systems. Independent thinkers possessing these attributes are the cornerstone of engaged democratic societies. In short, the goals, skills, and competencies associated with liberal education are indispensable foundations for the civic mission of higher education and for the United States itself. They form part of what the late political scientist Benjamin Barber referred to as the arts of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

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And yet, these educational competencies are not sufficient in and of themselves, contrary to the operating narrative during long periods when higher education's civic mission focused on preparing elite males to provide progressive leadership for a maturing nation. This narrative proved inadequate during the Truman administration, when the President's Commission on Higher Education established college attendance for the majority as an ambitious national goal.<sup>5</sup> A more inclusive democratic society whose campuses were bulging with first-generation college students needed more than well-educated leadership among the elite classes. Instead, such a society required a well-educated citizenry of individuals prepared through engagement with their richly diverse campuses and communities to contribute to the public good.

Thus, as colleges became more inclusive, the goal of providing access for students from previously excluded groups was circumscribed by a larger understanding of all the dimensions and obligations of truly diverse institutions. Civically engaged institutions found it increasingly difficult to divorce their well-being from that of their surrounding neighborhoods, and local communities of need became extensions of the campus. The dynamics of social inequality, particularly racial and ethnic hierarchies, became strategic challenges closely related to institutions' civic missions. Today, many colleges and universities have begun joining their civic practices to their equity objectives, investing in the "shadow communities"<sup>6</sup> that struggle with limited resources and opportunities but are flush with social assets and creative minds needed for economic and social prosperity.

### **Anchors and allies**

In meeting its civic mission at this particular moment, higher education aspires to four primary goals, all of which find fulfillment in the anchor institution model. First, colleges and universities need to restore their reputations with the general public, segments of which view them as exclusive institutions enabling personal private gain rather than as providers of a public good benefiting the larger society. At the national level, both major political parties have advanced a transactional narrative of higher education. In its most punitive form, this narrative castigates universities and colleges as institutions consumed by their own

self-interest; in the more benign version, it characterizes higher education positively, as an enabler of individual opportunity. Contrary to this characterization, universities and colleges play critical roles as anchors of communities much broader than themselves, with a vast array of local partners in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. They are in fact essential to the political economies of their neighborhoods.

Second, colleges and universities can expand the menu of choices available to individuals and communities whose participation in the broader economy and American life is so often foreclosed. Anchor partnerships, when fully engaged, comprehensive, reciprocal, and democratic, can disrupt this cycle of exclusion. As members of such partnerships, higher education institutions can build educational pipelines from preschool through college; attend to health and wellness needs in places dependent on financially stressed hospitals and nonprofit health providers; augment economic opportunities by investing locally through strategic purchasing and employment decisions; and enhance the work of local partners in the fine, visual, and performing arts as they rejuvenate forgotten communities.

Third, civic practice should be embedded in the larger educational mission of each institution. At the most engaged anchor campuses, civic work flourishes through both the undergraduate curriculum and cocurricular programs. The impact of civic engagement on student learning is well documented. For a generation of students hungry for the integration of theory and practice and keen to link ideas with social problems, anchor work promises to positively influence intellectual growth, civic competency, and intercultural skills.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the civic imperative involves preparing a new generation of leaders to govern a more just and effective intercultural democracy. Some will come from our student bodies, and some will emerge from our neighborhoods. Together, using the arts and skills of democratic engagement, they promise to vanquish the current paranoia and mend our deep social divides. As anchor institutions nurturing such leadership, colleges and universities can cultivate the democratic culture we need now, building bonds across differences through shared civic practice.

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### **Anchors at work**

We are witnessing the civic renewal of higher education, supported by organizations like the Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF), Campus Compact, the Coalition for Urban and Metropolitan Universities, The Democracy Commitment, Imagining America, the Interfaith Youth Core, the American Democracy Project (organized by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities), and Project Pericles. These organizations and others, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities, are engaging in work designed to support higher education's civic renewal. In 2015, over four hundred fifty of Campus Compact's member presidents signed a national call for commitment to campus-community partnerships and pledged to build civic action plans within one year. Similarly, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, with over ninety institutional members, shares a national objective of promoting urban anchor partnerships. More and more of higher education's civic mission is now expressed through work addressing the equity challenges of local neighborhoods. Below, I highlight a few in greater depth.

Rutgers University–Newark is a remarkable example of the anchor institution model. Led by Chancellor Nancy Cantor with assistance from Vice Chancellor Peter Englot, the university partners with the city government, the public schools, local nonprofits, economic and arts institutions, and other higher education entities to provide the city of Newark with a jolt of material and social capital. Rutgers–Newark is a leading anchor in the Newark City of Learning Collaborative (NCLC), a partnership of roughly sixty public schools, nonprofits, and higher education institutions. The collaborative has set a goal of increasing the share of Newark residents holding postsecondary degrees and credentials from 17 percent in 2010 to 25 percent by 2025 by attacking key barriers to student success and providing important interventions in overcoming persistent obstacles.<sup>8</sup> This work has critical implications for racial and socioeconomic equity, as Newark's population is 50 percent black and 36 percent Latino, and 39 percent of its children live in poverty.<sup>9</sup> Rutgers–Newark's

Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies is the organizational backbone for the NCLC's efforts, managing data collection and analysis as well as efforts to demystify college admissions and financial aid. Rutgers–Newark undergraduates mentor local high school students, and the university partners with Shabazz High School to provide professional development for faculty and staff. In concert with the mayor's office, Rutgers–Newark is expanding K–16 partnerships, reengaging disconnected youths, retaining college students, and reconnecting adult learners. Rutgers–Newark also treats its purchasing and employment practices as part of a larger strategy promoting economic growth and job opportunities. This work has changed not only the community, but also the institution.

The University of Nebraska–Omaha (UNO) is a powerful anchor partner with a unique approach to its civic coalition. Similarly committed to the economic and civic prosperity of its locale, UNO houses nonprofit partners on its downtown campus in the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center, a seventy-thousand-square-foot facility hosting thirty-seven organizations representing health, education, cultural, research, diversity, environmental, and civic interests. The physical proximity fosters greater integration, deeper trust, and stronger leadership within partnerships, including those involving service-learning faculty and community organizations. The Weitz Center offers free meeting space for important community dialogues and forums, workshops, trainings, speakers, and cultural events, as well as space for service-learning and cocurricular civic engagement programs.

The University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) focuses its anchor work in West Philadelphia, primarily in collaboration with nine schools. Its Netter Center for Community Partnerships supports nearly seventy academic service-learning courses, engaging approximately 1,700 students annually. In addition, the Netter Center mobilizes the vast resources and talents of a major research university to support “university-assisted community schools,” emerging innovative schools that engage and advance not only their students but also the entire local neighborhood. Undergraduate and graduate students offer school programming during and after the school day through service-learning courses, internships, work-study assignments, and volunteer opportunities. A number of esteemed

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Port Richmond  
Partnership  
Leadership  
Academy**

research faculty from across the university are directly engaged in UPenn's overall efforts in West Philadelphia. UPenn has also had a major economic impact through strategic coordination of its purchasing and investment activity, with a particular focus on health care and business development. The goal is to spur local employment through training programs and provide assistance to minority-owned businesses. In 2015, UPenn's Economic Inclusion Program spent \$122 million in West Philadelphia, and its Health System hired more than 1,500 local residents.

Smaller institutions are equally effective in anchor partnerships. Guided by its founding Lutheran mission, Augsburg University in Minneapolis combines the liberal arts and professional studies "in service to our neighbors."<sup>10</sup> This civic commitment informs its curriculum and is present throughout campus culture. In the early 1990s, Minneapolis became part of

the Somali diaspora resulting from that nation's civil war. Assisted by Lutheran and Catholic relocation programs, Somali refugees migrated to the area, most notably to the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood just down the boulevard from Augsburg. Under the leadership of President Paul Pribbenow, Augsburg reached out to their Somali neighbors through service learning, its Bonner Leaders program, its nursing program, and other means to create a corridor of support and opportunity to the campus. The institution is now more diverse and more committed to its central mission. Augsburg helped form a coalition of two dozen higher education institutions in metropolitan Minneapolis, all located along the light-rail line linking the Twin Cities. These institutions have coordinated shared purchasing programs, workplace development initiatives, public safety initiatives, and community-based research around equity and social justice issues.

My own institution, Wagner College, is a small comprehensive institution on Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York City. Wagner's curriculum, "The Practical Liberal Arts," includes a sizable commitment to community-based learning. It began twenty years ago as the faculty and administration began honoring place-based inquiry and community engagement as central tenets for student learning in a diverse democracy. Concomitantly, the cocurriculum took on greater importance as diversity, leadership, and civic engagement all became essential priorities.

The Port Richmond neighborhood sits two miles from Wagner's campus. It houses fifteen thousand residents, roughly 60 percent of whom are Mexican and 20 percent of whom are African American; the remainder are predominantly white working and lower-middle class. In the

last ten years, through our Center for Leadership and Community Engagement, Wagner College has spearheaded a comprehensive partnership involving more than thirty-two neighbor-

hood organizations, with a focus on five policy areas: immigration justice, the arts and public history, small-business economic development, health and wellness, and educational opportunity and college readiness. The latter two are the largest commitments.

The partnership works with K–16 institutions to connect with Port Richmond students and families who have little expectation of and no experience with higher education. Wagner maintains staff and offices in elementary school PS 21, middle school IS 51, and Port Richmond High School (PRHS). We work with a number of other elementary schools that feed into the pipeline as well, including two charter schools that Wagner cosponsored (one of which was founded for undocumented and other immigrant children). Mentoring, tutoring, after-school activities, adult learning opportunities, and teacher professional development form the spine of the partnership.

With the help of the New World Foundation and a major alumni donor who grew up in Port Richmond, Wagner and PRHS designed the Port Richmond Partnership Leadership Academy at Wagner College. The academy works intensively with PRHS students, who reside on campus for five weeks each summer as they

complete enhanced high school courses (following the sophomore year) and full college courses (following the junior and senior years). Students also complete a course on the theory and practice of American democracy that involves engagement in Port Richmond, beginning with the construction of asset maps of their own neighborhoods. Upon completing the academy, students have earned one full semester of college credit. To date, the academy has an extremely high success rate; 100 percent of students who completed the program in the first two classes are now enrolled at four-year institutions, and half are full-scholarship students at Wagner. The academy's mission is creating educational success for those often denied the support to succeed while also disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.

There are many other rich examples of anchor work that attacks inequalities and fights for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic equity. Johns Hopkins University maintains a truly comprehensive economic impact with its strategic initiatives in Baltimore. The University of Southern California is engaged in critical programs in South Los Angeles. The University of Maryland, Baltimore is working with middle schoolers preparing for eventual careers in the health professions. Many others are powerfully involved or beginning similar efforts in their locales.

### The work ahead

There is a civic renewal underway in higher education. With the evolution from service learning to strategic and impactful neighborhood partnerships, higher education's civic practice has become more intentionally connected to the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. While the civic and equity agendas are distinct, they have become interrelated at this critical political moment with the resurgence of overt nativism, anti-intellectualism, and racism. The anchor model is built around direct partnership and reciprocity between higher education and local communities, including communities of color and class subordination. Integrating these two domains promises greater impact in both arenas, building leadership skills, civic competency, and social agency among all involved. The coalition building, personal trust, and basic empathy that result will increase the probability of a transformative politics leading to a more inclusive democracy.

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To this end, the Association of American Colleges and Universities plays a key role. Much as it insisted in the early 1990s, in the face of significant opposition, that diversity and multiculturalism are central to a vibrant democracy, it is now pointing us toward racial healing and transformation as well as the centrality of higher education's civic mission. Through strategic community partnerships, our work to advance civic engagement and equity can become common practice in fulfilling higher education's historic role as an anchor within a just democracy. □

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#### NOTES

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