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Academe needs to broaden its concept of the public good (essay)

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President Trump's executive orders, seeking to temporarily stop immigration from several majority-Muslim countries, continue to generate uncertainty for tens of thousands of international students and scholars. Meanwhile, a recent national survey of over 250 U.S. colleges reported that almost 40 percent ^[1] are experiencing declines in international student applications. The spillover effects of such a potentially major drop in international student enrollment would be significant, including declines in international contributions to the U.S. economy (\$33 billion ^[2] in 2015-16), as well as university revenue (more than half of the increased revenue ^[3] for some universities).

Such income loss could potentially lead to an increase in local tuition, given many universities' financial reliance on international student tuition and fees to subsidize their operations. Numerous university leaders, associations and faculty groups have also openly condemned ^[4] the president's travel ban for unjustly disrupting the lives of countless internationals as well as on broader moral grounds.

While the attempted revocation of visas based on one's citizenship continues to make headlines, it is hardly an isolated issue. Regardless of whether the travel ban is upheld, international students and scholars felt unwelcome ^[5] long before the 2016 presidential election. The difference now is that anti-immigrant sentiments are becoming part of the mainstream discourse. The rhetoric of Trump's campaign and proposals, with phrases such as "a total and complete shutdown" ^[6] of Muslims entering the United States," have been entrenched in protectionist ideology that received considerable voter support. Such political agendas raise critically important questions in light of the historical mission of higher education in the United States to serve the public good, namely: Who will constitute the "public" in this new era? And what "good" can higher education potentially transform?

Public Nationalism and Isolationism

There are many potential hazards when the public good is narrowly constrained to the interests of the nation-state. The resurgent political slogan "America First," which has emphasized patriotism at the expense of other countries, assumes that there are winners and losers within this national pursuit of the public good. Such a protectionist version of the public good, however seemingly virtuous, can too easily veer from blind patriotism to national supremacy.

Academe is not immune from such isolationist tendencies, as demonstrated by the fact that most higher education research articles are written by scholars in the United States about the United States -- even while the publication audience is increasingly international. Moreover, the nation is less and less the epicenter of knowledge creation and dissemination, with a surge of scholarly papers and patents originating in China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, to list a few. Countries are more interconnected now than ever before, in what is now commonly referred to as the global society. In short, the United States has far more to lose than gain by restricting higher education agendas, partnerships and students to the domestic level.

Those of us in higher education might take a second look in trying to identify some of our potential blind spots, which include:

Limiting the “public good” to the privileged. U.S. students’ entry to college and their all too narrowly defined “success” (i.e., graduation) in it are among the most commonly researched and funded areas in higher education in this country. They have become almost synonymous with what we think of as our public-good mission. But, while college degree attainment is certainly important, this limited association may overshadow larger global realities.

The fact is that, from a broader view, anyone who enters any form of U.S. higher education is privileged compared to most other people in the world. Access to education is arguably a human right, but it is not even a remote possibility for the hundreds of millions of people outside the country who are struggling with extreme poverty, forced displacement, lack of safety and other conditions that would make any college campus in the United States a safe refuge.

The World Bank estimates that more than 800 million people, well over double the population of the United States, survive with less than \$2 a day. Is the current U.S. higher education notion of the public good a luxury that makes invisible those who struggle to even enter secondary education?

Supply-side economists may argue that higher education has potential indirect benefits for the poor. But the inequalities in places outside the United States are so vast that educational mobility is not a hopeful promise -- it’s more like a winning lottery ticket with insurmountable odds.

My point is not to minimize the very real challenges within this country, especially for low-income and minoritized U.S. college students. Rather, it is to address why it is so important to broaden our view of “public” to those who are not citizens, including not only undocumented residents but also those living outside our national borders, and to consider the broader global context that higher education has the potential to transform.

Otherwise, higher education teaching and research fails in its obligation to address wider national and international societal concerns. Whom we educate and what we research can -- and should -- be more directly linked to poverty, safety and security and intergroup relations that apply more globally, for example.

Neglecting neocolonial consequences. Defining the public beyond the nation-state is not just an appeal for inclusion but also a moral responsibility. Do our national interests, sometimes framed as the public good, lead to “public bad” for other countries? Narrowing the public good to that which falls within U.S. borders has the danger of becoming exclusionary and reinforcing neocolonialism globally. Is a winner-take-all approach consistent with our notion of the public good?

Those involved in higher education can claim to be proponents of the public good -- committing one’s practices and research in ways that promote justice, equity and improved well-being for the nation-state -- but, at the same time, unknowingly perpetuate global inequalities or leave them unchanged. For example, the dominance of the English language in the global knowledge society, the hegemonic criteria in determining and reinforcing national and international university rankings, and the country location of world-class universities and top academic publishers, all of which highly favor the United States, restrict higher education’s ability to serve the global public.

Imagining a Global Good

All that said, the broader notion of a public good that denies the relevance of the nation-state -- such as a global good -- is also problematic. Global agendas still require cooperation from nation-states, from which public investments in education are vital. Moreover, trying to capture a unifying global good can fail to explore the increasingly unequal power relations associated with globalization. A global version of the public good may not address the everyday struggles of marginalized groups. And there is abundant evidence of westernized norms being interchangeably confused or imposed as global ones.

The United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals for 2015 was one such attempt to establish a common global agenda and was heavily criticized for its limited inclusion of low-income countries in the planning phase. The UN’s focus on universal primary education, for example, neglected to account for the basic need for qualified teachers and better teacher training in most African countries.

Now, the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, as an effort to be more inclusive of a wider range of stakeholders, consist of 17 goals and a whopping 169 associated objectives. In regard to higher education, the aim is to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” While such global values might appear quite benign, for the world’s poorest countries, they cannot all be realistically achieved, at least partly due to their inherent incompatibility ^[7] with other objectives, such as environmental and economic goals. Sub-Saharan Africa is arguably the most peripheral region and would require more reliance on foreign aid and investment, resulting in greater indebtedness and potentially leaving the current political and economic global order unchanged.

Contested Spaces

So, who comprises the public and where is the public good located? To summarize: the public should not be restricted to the nation-state or watered down globally, as these illusory scales too easily disregard people who live at the margins. The public good is not a zero-sum game, nor is it a metaphorical joining of hands, resulting in all talk and no action.

Rather, the public good is an ideological battle made real in the contested spaces of our everyday lives. Change does not wait for a trickle down of political decisions, even at the highest presidential level. And change does not occur through mere global sensitivities, relegating our sympathies to the so-called third world. Instead, change takes place in the very real day-to-day human struggles that occur within and across national boundaries -- not remotely situated in a faraway location but realized in everyday experience.

Compared to some parts of the world, academics in the United States still have considerable freedom to make choices as to whom and what we study. We can write about the public good as a detached social scientist, and for those of us who do so, we must be conscious of who constitutes the public being addressed and the consequences for those excluded.

But for the more daring, more work is needed in engaging with the public good as a human experience affected by national and international agendas, especially in giving voice to those without power, within and outside our borders, and to make their circumstances known. We may write about the margins, but do we live in them and know them by first names? By actively engaging with the peripheries, we are reconstituting the “public” in which we are all part.

There are numerous socially engaged intellectuals at my university and elsewhere whose work focuses on people in the margins and beyond the nation-state. The forgotten and excluded include refugees and asylum seekers, undocumented students, international students, and others who are too easily overlooked or excluded as part of the university’s mission in serving the public good. What is needed more than a single policy or election result are greater numbers of individuals and groups actively voicing the challenges of the most vulnerable and advocating on their behalf -- whether through community partnerships, coalition building, informing policy or simply being more aware of the implications of our work beyond the U.S. majority’s interests.

In conclusion, the battle for the public good still exists, here in the United States and in countries throughout the world, and it started long before our recent presidential election. My comments are not to engage in one issue at the expense of others, as all movements are interlinked, but to consider more broadly the ways we frame our work and for whom our recommendations are made -- and the globally public responsibilities we all share.

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