

The Next Wave: Building a University Civic Engagement Service for the Twenty-First Century

Gar Alperovitz, Ted Howard

Abstract

Historically, America's land-grant universities offered non-elites access to higher education while developing and disseminating new, practical knowledge (particularly agricultural science). In the late twentieth century, the historic land-grant mission was eclipsed by other institutional concerns. Efforts now are under way around the country to revive that tradition within higher education and make it relevant to the social and economic needs of citizens and communities in the twenty-first century. At the University of Maryland at College Park, the Engaged University Initiative is working to help refocus the institution's commitments and resources (human, intellectual, financial) to build toward a civic engagement service that will be relevant to land-grant universities nationally.

One of the federal government's important contributions to democratic life was the establishment of the nation's network of land-grant colleges through the Morrill Act of 1862. That act and subsequent legislation led to the creation of land-grant institutions in all fifty states and the District of Columbia, land-grants at historically black colleges, community colleges for Native Americans, and, more recently, sea-grant and space-grant institutions. When President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law, the country's first non-elite colleges were born. Their original mission was relatively straightforward: teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts, as well as classical studies, so that members of the working classes could obtain both a practical and a liberal education. Two key elements of the land-grant model were the agricultural experiment station, which generated practical knowledge, and an extension service to disseminate the station's research, in particular to farmers who could then apply it to increase productivity on their land.

But at the heart of Senator Morrill's (and Lincoln's) purpose was a grander idea than merely expanding crop yields. The land-grant vision was of an institution that could be a training ground for democratic life and civic practice. If citizens are not only born but "made" (that is, developed through education, training, and

exposure to democratic values and ideas), then land-grant institutions, by offering access to non-elites, would serve to deepen political democracy and strengthen civic life in the nation. As George R. McDowell has written, “. . . the principle behind their establishment was without historical precedent. That principle asserted that no part of human life and labor is beneath the notice of the university or without its proper dignity. Both by virtue of their scholarly aims and whom they would serve, the land-grant universities were established as people’s universities. That was their social contract” (2001).

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In recent decades the contract between land-grants and society has been largely broken. The reasons are manyfold. Farmers, once the majority of the nation, now constitute less than two percent of the labor force. Agriculture has become mainly a corporate and industrialized sector, and our population has become urbanized and suburbanized; the traditional extension services no longer directly touch the lives of large numbers of citizens. As

the farming population dwindled, many of the “people’s universities” began emulating elite private institutions, chasing federal, corporate, and philanthropic research dollars and staking their reputations increasingly on graduate-level education (though the great majority of their students were undergraduates). Research conducted by faculty with little connection to the surrounding community or citizenry of the state, and without clear and obvious direct application and social benefit, became the norm. Much good work was done, but the honored tradition of public service, the transfer of useful knowledge, skills, and technology to citizens who could apply them in their own lives and communities, and a commitment to addressing, and even helping to solve, social problems directly in the institution’s own environment became marginalized. The vast majority of students and faculty no longer came in touch with the extension services that had once been at the heart of their institutions. And in the halls of state legislatures around the country, land-grant presidents began hearing the accusing question, “But what are you doing for the people of our state?” Perhaps there is more than one reason state funding support as a percentage of the budget of public universities has been declining for at least the past two decades (Selingo 2003). Given

this picture, it was only partly in jest that McDowell concluded his study by noting, “A common reaction to ‘I’m writing a book on the future of extension and land-grant universities’ was ‘Do they have a future?’” Indeed, he reports that a friend told him the book might well be an epitaph for the land-grant universities as instruments of social change in American society (2001).

The growing public sense that land-grants have lost their way—or at least much of what had once made them distinctive and important to American democracy—has not escaped the notice of many concerned university leaders. In the mid-1990s, a group of university presidents, in partnership with the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), convened the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. A joint statement made by the leadership of the Commission in 1996 offered a dire assessment of that future:

We cannot sugar-coat the truth. Unprecedented problems confront our campuses. Institutions ignore a changing environment at their peril. Like dinosaurs, they risk becoming exhibits in a kind of cultural Jurassic Park: places of great interest and curiosity, increasingly irrelevant in a world that has passed them by. (*Kellogg Commission 1996, 1*)

To meet this challenge, the Commission called for a new covenant between land-grant universities and society “to breathe new life into their historic mission by going beyond extension to engagement.” As an engaged institution, a land-grant would respond to the current needs of its increasingly diverse student body, provide students with “practical opportunities” to prepare for the world they were about to enter, and “put its critical resources (knowledge and expertise) to work on the problems the communities it serves face.” (*Kellogg Commission 1999, 10*) This was essential not only to the future of land-grant universities themselves, but to the larger society:

The obstinate problems of today and tomorrow in our nation and world—poverty, family and community breakdown, restricted access to health care, hunger, overpopulation, global warming and other assaults on the natural environment—must be addressed by our universities if society is to have any chance at all of solving them. (*Kellogg Commission 2000, 20*)

Elements of the New Land-Grant

In the near decade since the Kellogg Commission began its work—and in many cases beginning well before—the initial elements of a newly relevant land-grant model have begun to quietly emerge in institutions around the country. The progress has been halting in some cases, dramatic in others, bold and experimental in still others. In contrast to the emphasis on transferring “technical expertise” that was at the heart of the original agricultural extension programs, the emerging new model is in the main based on a collaborative approach to problem solving: a two-way street in which practitioners and community members contribute to shaping the research, teaching, and service agenda of the university. In some cases, a community advisory board or other formal mechanism helps ensure that the voice of the community is present. In others, land-grant faculty and staff actively work to engage community members in identifying issues for research and action, understanding the impact of alternative solutions, and designing and implementing plans that build on local assets and emphasize shared leadership and active citizen participation. At its best, the collaborative approach enables a land-grant to fashion an expanding civic, problem-solving extension portfolio relevant to the twenty-first century. To cite only a few examples:

- The University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship sponsors numerous projects focused on “public work.” The Center’s Community Information Corps (CIC) has launched an initiative to bridge the digital divide of St. Paul’s West Side (largely immigrant) community. Over the past four years the CIC has worked with youth involved in various community action projects that demonstrate how technology can be used to enrich community and revitalize democracy. The university’s extension service offers a twelve-hour educational program for parents going through divorce; the program is delivered in sixty-five Minnesota counties, and some three thousand parents participate each year. Beyond specific projects and programs, the university has established the Council on Public Engagement (COPE), an institution-wide body charged with strengthening the public mission and practice across the full range of university activities in order to “enrich scholarship and research; enhance curricular content and process; prepare effective, productive citizens; address critical societal issues and solve public problems; and contribute to a democratic way of life” (*Boyte 2004*).

- Pennsylvania State University has established a community development extension program that focuses on improving community and economic decision making. The program provides research-based extension and outreach on municipal finance; economic development; land-use planning; and child, youth, and family well-being. Another outreach program aims to improve the environmental quality of a local watershed. The university recently also launched a new undergraduate minor in civic and community engagement, with students being given an opportunity to move beyond traditional service-learning through advocacy training.
- Oregon State University became the first research institution to redefine scholarship in ways that acknowledge and reward teaching, research, application, and service that are connected to problem solving and meeting community needs. Accompanying changes have elevated the position of field staff in extension offices to faculty status.
- Michigan State University's Community and Economic Development Program (CEDP) focuses on "engaging in responsive and innovative scholarship designed to improve the quality of life in distressed urban and regional communities" (CEDP). Among other activities, CEDP provides training to increase the capabilities of Michigan's community-based organizations. Within each of its targeted communities, the program maintains a resident community development professional who lives and works with community members.

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While we focus in this paper on land-grant models, there are also many related examples from other private and public universities. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, is internationally recognized for its Center for Community Partnerships (CCP). CCP works throughout West Philadelphia on a wide range of initiatives such as university-assisted community schools, public school reform, urban nutrition, and faith-based programs.

Portland State is a national leader in core curriculum reform as well as programs in community development and training to increase the capacity of community-based organizations. A few institutions, such as Trinity College, are pioneering efforts to invest portions of their endowment in targeted community revitalization.

Building a Comprehensive Land-Grant Model for the Twenty-First Century

While there has been much progress and steadily growing interest in establishing a new social contract and vision, public land-grant universities are still very far from full engagement with their communities and states. And no land-grant has yet succeeded in developing a comprehensive, integrated strategy for focusing the institution's commitments and resources (human, intellectual, financial) in a clear and intentional way.

At the University of Maryland at College Park, many of our colleagues across disciplines and at all levels—senior administrators, faculty, staff, and students, along with key partners in the surrounding community of Prince George's County, have taken up this challenge. For the past several years, we have been striving to develop a comprehensive model of a civically engaged land-grant institution, one that we hope will have national relevance and application. The work is self-consciously attempting to build on the many hard-won lessons of colleagues at other land-grants, as well as at private and public research universities and liberal arts colleges. The Democracy Collaborative, whose mission is to advance a new understanding of democracy for the twenty-first century and to promote sustained and widespread democratic practice, coordinates the effort. The Collaborative's Engaged University Initiative plays the leading role in attempting to catalyze university-community partnership aimed at improving the quality of life for the citizens of Prince George's County (and over time, more broadly throughout the state). The initiative is committed to fostering these partnerships in ways that enhance the teaching, research, scholarship, and standing of the university itself.

Over the last thirty years, Prince George's County, Maryland—the home of the university—has experienced one of the most significant demographic transformations in the country, shifting rapidly from a largely poor farming and working-class white community to a suburban, white collar, predominantly African American community. Today the county is alternately described as the largest, most affluent, and best-educated predominantly African

American suburb in the country, on the one hand, and—on the other—as Washington, D.C.’s, “9th Ward.” This designation implies that it shares the constellation of economic and social problems that confront under-resourced inner-city communities around the country.

Prince George’s County is grand in scale, with nearly 820,000 residents of every ethnic, racial, and religious background; a rapidly growing population of new immigrants from Central America, Africa, and the Caribbean speaking more than a hundred languages; and a sprawling geographic area of almost five hundred square miles and twenty-seven different municipalities. Three problems in particular stand out. First, compared to surrounding counties with majority white populations, Prince George’s has had difficulty attracting sizable business investments. There is no question that this is in large measure due to the county’s racial composition. Second, in managing one of the larger public school systems in the nation, county educators struggle with inadequate resources to address the many realities of its diverse student population, including a large proportion of English as a Second Language students and special education learners, and a high level of transience and turnover among both teachers and students. Finally, in contrast to neighboring jurisdictions (particularly Washington, D.C., and Montgomery County, Maryland), Prince George’s has a relatively small number of nonprofit and community-based organizations, and the majority of those have small staffs, minuscule budgets, and relatively low capacity.

The University of Maryland has long enjoyed a relatively peaceful relationship with its home county, and fortunately, the university does not have to overcome a legacy of community antagonism that many other, particularly urban, institutions have faced. It also has had considerable positive interaction with the community and state: a 2001 survey identified 384 community-focused research and outreach efforts representing expenditures in excess of \$60 million, of which 48 percent “directly impacted” communities in Prince George’s (*Wellford, LaFree, and Morris 2001, 3*), and, with an annual budget of some \$1.1 billion, it is the largest employer and economic force in the county (*Wellford, LaFree, and Morris 2001*). Nonetheless, the university is not widely seen as deeply connected with or available to the vast majority of county residents. Indeed, many see it as distant and disengaged. This perception was highlighted in a 2002 issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education*, in which journalist Paul Ruffins wrote, “The question of how or how much a college or university could

or should make its presence felt in a local community is an ongoing issue in higher education across the nation. But it has particular relevance in Prince George's County, a largely African American jurisdiction bordering Washington, DC. All three of its public universities [Bowie State University, Prince George's Community College, and the University of Maryland at College Park] . . . have been accused of somehow being missing in action" (8).

The Engaged University Initiative is designed to move the institution well beyond a set of disparate research and service activities into a new, strategic civic engagement posture that helps shape curriculum, research, community outreach, university rewards and incentives, and financial decision making and procedures. In other words, we seek not a "program" of engagement but to help infuse the university's culture, practices, and structures with a new spirit. The process is one of learning and discovery, experimenting with and creating models on campus and in Prince George's County that show clear promise for replication throughout the state and nationally. Although the effort is embryonic and faces an array of obstacles, a number of elements have emerged as particularly important to this process, including four top priorities: (1) building authentic partnerships with the community; (2) organizing internally within the university; (3) leveraging university financial resources; and (4) enhancing academic research, teaching, and training.

Working in Partnership with Community-Based Organizations and Local Government

Building authentic partnerships between the university, community groups, and local governments is the foundation of this work. We seek to create an environment in which the skills, knowledge, and resources of the university are made available to the community and the hard-earned wisdom and experience of community practitioners and public officials is welcomed and honored by the university. This has required a substantial investment of time and effort in learning to listen to one another, develop reciprocal relationships, and discover points of common ground and mutual interest. Fostering meaningful relationships between the university and the community also has meant placing a priority on such issues as inclusion, justice and equality, diversity, and the intersection of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of "difference." Central to the process has been an ongoing series

of “We’re Engaged!” meetings that bring together community and university leaders to exchange ideas, learn from one another, and create a sense of shared enterprise that is intellectually challeng-

“We seek to create an environment in which the . . . resources of the university are made available to the community and the . . . experience of community practitioners . . . is welcomed and honored by the university.”

ing and exciting. To date, these meetings have attracted more than five hundred faculty, students, staff, and administrators from the university, as well as activists, teachers, journalists, political officials, and nonprofit leaders from the community. Each day-long meeting focuses on a particular theme, such as Conducting Community-Based Research; Bridging Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Gender Differences; and The Art of Democracy-Building, and includes working sessions to plan specific projects. Between formal meetings, efforts are made to nurture the evolving network and involve

its members in a range of activities: civil society lectures featuring prominent national speakers; faculty and student tours of the community to meet with local government and nonprofit leaders; and on-campus events with particular appeal to nonacademic participants, such as a day-long symposium on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that examined the impact of the *Brown* decision locally and the unfinished work of creating racial equality and equal opportunity in the county.

As a result of these exchanges, three key areas of need have been identified as initial areas of university-county collaboration: (1) improving the quality of public school education through increased parent and community involvement; (2) creating innovative approaches to community-based economic development, ranging from training in financial literacy to anchoring wealth and assets in the county in ways that generate jobs and products for local consumption; and (3) organizing venues that support imaginative forms of community cultural expression and give voice to the concerns of youth, new immigrants, people of color, the poor, and the disenfranchised. Demonstration projects involving university faculty and staff and community members are now under way in each of these areas.

Internal Organizing and Building an On-Campus Constituency and Culture for Change

It is relatively easy to focus university action toward engagement when a favorably inclined president wants to do so. Our current president, C. Dan Mote, is one such leader, but he is an exception to the general rule. Moreover, presidents come and go at major universities, and important initiatives may not be sustained once the leadership of the university changes. We believe it is critical to develop within the institution a bottom-up organizing process that builds a positive culture for change and establishes a constituency that can help advance new efforts over time. This, in turn, helps create awareness within the administration (present or future) that it has campuswide backing and that it is in its interests to work with outreach programs. Beginning two years ago, the Engaged University Initiative began the systematic and intentional organizing of internal university constituencies and resources. The model is based on an approach familiar to community organizers, but not often employed in the academic world: treating the campus as a community that must be organized from the grassroots up in order to effect and sustain long-term change. This integrated program involves directed community-campus dialogues, networking faculty and staff who are supportive but also often highly isolated, stimulating relationships between the university and community organizations and leaders, identifying and enlisting the support of key university officials able to move resources and restructure institutional policies, and creating and brokering “hands-on” community-based initiatives.

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We are now working to ensure that the Engaged University Initiative is an integral part of the university’s upcoming 150th anniversary celebration—a year-long program that kicks off in fall 2005. A coordinating committee of campus representatives has produced a white paper outlining the themes and guiding principles and elements of the sesquicentennial, among which are: focusing the university’s educational programs on enlightened

citizenry and societal impact; reaffirming access and outreach as a land-grant institution; producing tangible benefits to the state, region, and nation; and connecting with and engaging in society.

Leveraging University Financial Resources for Civically Engaged, Community-Based Development

Institutions of higher education have an obvious vested interest in building strong relationships with the communities that surround their campuses. They do not have the option of relocating and thus are of necessity place-based anchors. While corporations, businesses, and residents often flee economically depressed low-income urban and suburban edge-city neighborhoods, universities remain. At a time when foundations that help establish community-based projects are commonly unable to continue with ongoing involvement over long periods of time, universities are by their nature an important potential institutional base for helping community-based economic development in general and civically engaged development in particular.

In 1996, more than 1,900 urban-core universities in the United States spent \$136 billion on salaries, goods, and services—nine times the amount of federal direct spending on urban business and job development in the same year. These institutions collectively employ two million workers (only a third of these jobs are faculty; the remaining two-thirds are administrative and support staff positions) and are among the fastest-growing employers in the country, adding 300,000 jobs between 1990 and 1999. America's colleges and universities also hold more than \$100 billion in real estate (*Hahn 2002, 3*).

In recent years, a number of universities (though as yet few land-grants) have begun to focus a small part of their economic activity in ways designed to benefit their surrounding communities. Since 1996, Trinity College in Hartford has invested more than \$7 million of its endowment in neighborhood revitalization within a fifteen-square-block area of the campus; the effort is projected to generate more than \$100 million in new construction. The University of Pennsylvania shifted 9 percent of its annual purchasing, thereby injecting over \$57 million into the West Philadelphia economy. Howard University, collaborating with local civic and neighborhood groups and Fannie Mae, created 307 new housing units in its surrounding neighborhood, which in turn helped spawn commercial development and improvements in vacant and boarded-up properties. The Duke-Durham

Neighborhood Partnership Initiative has invested more than \$2 million in an affordable housing loan fund to promote home ownership and community stabilization. The University of Southern California has instituted a program to increase employment from neighborhoods immediately surrounding its campus, and in one recent period, one out of every seven applicants for staff positions was hired from the seven nearest zip codes (*Hahn 2002; ICIC and CEOs for Cities 2002*).

Within Prince George's County, the University of Maryland is an economic enterprise of considerable impact. Each year, a good part of its more than \$1.1 billion budget flows through and from the campus, including some \$140 million in purchasing and \$140 million in construction and real estate development (*Porcari 2005*). How might these resources be leveraged to meet the university's needs while making a significant contribution to local economic development and community well-being? In order to formulate an effective approach, the Engaged University Initiative, in consultation with senior university officials and local government representatives, is now undertaking a systematic review of the institution's programs of purchasing, hiring, workforce development, community outreach, and real estate development.

Linking the flow of university resources to community organizations and institutions requires a great deal of technical expertise and support, particularly given the relative lack of strength and experience among local community-based organizations. To some extent, we will need to build within the university a new capacity for working with the community to devise and implement new strategies capable of anchoring capital, building community assets, and stabilizing local economies. At the same time, the University of Maryland is fortunate to be home to many valuable resources appropriate to this endeavor, including a center for entrepreneurship, a center for smart growth, and design studios to help neighborhood groups shape economic development in their communities. In addition to its agricultural programs, the cooperative extension service provides financial counseling, encourages healthy lifestyles through better diet and nutrition programs, and offers other family services. Thousands of undergraduate students are residents of "learning-living" dormitories with programs of community service and engagement. The Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity is a university-wide initiative that links research knowledge with promising community practices and policies on high school leaving, access to jobs

and education for welfare recipients, and racial disparities in relationship to civic engagement. Our colleges of education, arts and humanities, engineering, and social sciences all have substantial programs of community engagement and local capacity building.

In addition, the Democracy Collaborative has generated a substantial body of research and knowledge on the wide range of rapidly growing democratic, common asset, community economic development institutions. These various approaches (including community development corporations, employee-owned and locally anchored businesses, urban land trusts, co-ops, nonprofit businesses, and municipal enterprise) utilize strategies involving the ownership of assets to benefit different groups and small and larger publics. At a time when federal and state subsidies are being cut and charitable programs are proving insufficient to meet growing local needs, channeling university financial resources and expertise toward these place-based development models can help produce the kind of economic stability that is a requirement of strong, vibrant, healthy, and democratic communities. In spring 2005, the Collaborative is launching a Web-based national clearinghouse on these innovations and how universities might partner with them (<http://www.assetstrategies.org>).

Enhancing Teaching, Research, and Training the Next Generation of Engaged, Democratic Citizens

In some visions, the engaged university seems almost like a social work or business development agency, with little or no relationship to its educational and research mission. We disagree. Indeed, we think both the educational and research functions of the university can be enhanced by civic engagement work—if, that is, the concept is taken seriously.

To begin with, there are many areas in which hands-on community engagement by students and faculty offers powerful learning experiences. Research programs—ranging from nutrition and health to environmental protection, from literacy and cultural history to economic development in complex social systems—can often be advanced powerfully by efforts in (and with) communities close at hand. In the new economic work we are developing, we are also continuously looking for opportunities to build significant educational, training, and research activities into the programs. But the issues involved go far beyond such matters. As noted at the outset of this paper, the original land-grant vision was much more than simply an idea about agricultural research

and extension. These institutions were meant to serve as intellectual and practical training grounds for non-elites to become more effective participants in the nation's political democracy. This mission has never been more important than it is today, at a time when public opinion polls consistently show that the great majority of Americans no longer believe their voice matters in government, when electoral participation (even taking into account the 2004 presidential election) is extremely low, and when millions of new immigrants, racial minorities, and disenfranchised populations remain detached from local and national decision making.

“The goal is to train new generations of scholars and practitioners who seek to connect democratic values and theory with practice and advocacy in communities at home and abroad . . .”

To help meet these challenges, the Engaged University Initiative has begun offering our first series

of courses in a new academic program, Democracy Studies and Civic Practice. An extraordinary number of democratic scholars and theorists are based at the University of Maryland, along with more than twenty centers, institutes, and programs in four colleges focused on democratic theory, civic education, community building, civic engagement, and political participation. The Democracy Studies and Civic Practice program draws on this broad range of expertise. The goal is to train new generations of scholars and practitioners who seek to connect democratic values and theory with practice and advocacy in communities at home and abroad, and thereby help produce engaged graduates who will move into new or continued work in government, community-based organizations, and social movements. Undergraduate and graduate students will receive interdisciplinary instruction in theoretical, comparative, historical, and policy perspectives on democratic governance and civic practice, as well as exposure to advocacy and activism. They also will gain hands-on experience through supervised practicum and internship experiences with local community-based organizations. A range of degree options is being developed, including undergraduate certificate and graduate certificate, a professional master's degree, and an interdisciplinary Ph.D.

The Coming Challenge

Clearly, the challenges facing any attempt to bring the resources of land-grant universities to bear on the many economic, social, and democratic problems facing America are large. We at the University of Maryland—and our colleagues working on similar problems throughout the state and nation—are only at the beginning of a process to be measured in decades, not weeks, months, or even years. Still, we are encouraged by the gains that have been made at our own institution and elsewhere. We also think we have made progress in clarifying some key foundational principles for the next stage of development: (1) stressing partnership relationships; (2) building a long-term internal culture and constituency; (3) leveraging the university’s economic capacities; and (4) emphasizing teaching, research, and democratic citizen development as central to effective engagement work. These principles are important both for their own sake and for other reasons as well: public institutions in general and land-grant universities in particular clearly face extraordinary financial challenges in the years ahead. Average state contributions to the budgets of four-year public institutions fell from 43.7 percent in 1987 to 30.8 percent in 2001. They have no doubt continued to fall during the recent recession (*National Center for Education Statistics 2004*).

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One additional thought informs the current work: the idea of a “civic engagement service” that builds on the efforts under way throughout the nation is of particular interest. Ultimately, this would require national public support similar to that which the agricultural extension service has received. Thus a serious longer-term goal for the next wave of land-grant institutions is the development of sufficient experience and solid research, which ultimately might establish the basis for a comprehensive federal program of scale and impact appropriate to the challenges facing the nation.

Programs that not only meet the educational needs of the state, but also demonstrate the university’s positive impact on local economic, educational, and social development, are popular with elected officials. In our view, they are an important element in helping consolidate public understanding and bipartisan

political support for the university in the coming decades. In short, not only is engagement important to the future of democracy, it may well be critical to the future of the university itself.

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About the Authors

- Gar Alperovitz is the Lionel R. Bauman Professor of Political Economy at the University of Maryland. His most recent book is *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy*. He can be reached at <http://www.garalperovitz.com>.
- Ted Howard is the executive director of the Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland (<http://www.democracycollaborative.org>).