


Not Taking Democracy for Granted: Higher Education, Inclusion, and Community Trust

Nancy Cantor
Chancellor, Rutgers University – Newark¹

Not Taking Democracy for Granted: Higher Education, Inclusion, and Community Trust



**“...we have taken
democracy for granted...it
has to be enacted anew in
every generation, in every
year and day, in the living
relations of person to
person in all social forms
and institutions.”**
John Dewey, 1937

Nancy Cantor
Chancellor
Rutgers University – Newark

Higher Education for Democratic Innovation:
Challenges and Opportunities
Belfast, Northern Ireland
June 26, 2014

I want to begin with the apparently simple concept that democracy requires deliberate attention and that constructive action must be built on the recognition that innovation, inclusion, and social responsibility go hand in hand. As John Dewey observed, in an essay in 1937:

“...we have taken democracy for granted...it has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.”²

Navigating those “living relations of person to person” constitutes some of the toughest work that any of us do, and decades of work in social psychology documents the persistent tendency of

¹ Delivered June 26, 2014 at the conference titled, “Higher Education for Democratic Innovation: Challenges and Opportunities,” held at Queen’s University, Belfast, Northern Ireland sponsored by the Council of Europe in partnership with the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy.

² Dewey, J. (1937, October). Education and Social Change. *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 23, 6, 472-474.

all of us to succumb to the diffusion of responsibility, leaving it to someone else to come to the rescue, and the more people there are, the less likely we are to step forth – but stepping forth is what we must do, even if no obvious solutions are in sight.

Writer and essayist Wendell Berry captured poetically and poignantly this active role and responsibility that we all share to use our freedom of inquiry, our creative minds, our education, in the service of an expansive understanding of what is possible in the places we inhabit in our world and in our democracy.

He said:

“I will say, from my own belief and experience, that imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it... By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place...As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy.”³

And, of course, the same can be said of higher education institutions. There is a role – indeed a profoundly important role – for higher education as an “imager of place” or as the social legal theorist, Susan Sturm would say as an “institutional citizen” – with the social responsibilities (not just the institutional freedoms) that entails, and we are gathered here in Belfast to explore the nuances of that role and those responsibilities.⁴

Imagining our Place: Talking to Strangers

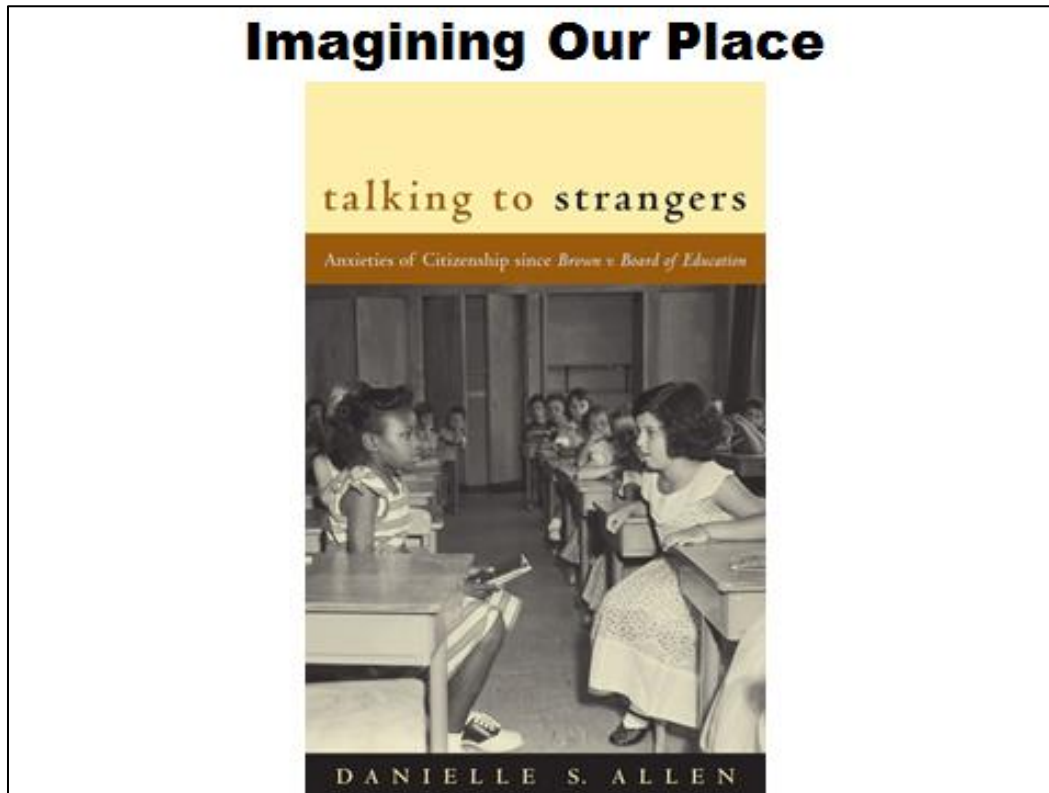
There is a very important geography to the deliberate action of imagining our place as institutional citizens— how we belong in our place; what it means to be of the place – and it is defined (by contrast to the ivory tower metaphor) by its outward-looking, publicly-engaged thrust. This geography requires a shift of orientation; a decentering away from the institution. As individuals, it is a move from independence to interdependence, from personal citizenship to community trust, as the distinguished political theorist Danielle Allen urges in her book “*Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education.*”⁵ Documenting the widely shared narrative of inter-racial, inter-group distrust, accumulated in the U.S. before and since that landmark Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, she reminds us also of the

³ Wendell E. Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” 2012 Jefferson Lecture, National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, DC.

⁴ Susan P. Sturm, “The Architecture of Inclusion: Interdisciplinary Insights on Pursuing Institutional Citizenship,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 29, no. 2 (2006): 248–334.

⁵ Danielle S. Allen, “Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since *Brown v. Board of Education*,” The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 2004.

countless daily personal sacrifices that ordinary citizens make to help others. These small, daily actions that she describes as keeping democracy working are so powerful because they fly in the face of that wariness of strangers we teach to generations of children – after all: “don’t talk to strangers” has to be one of the most well-worn admonitions.

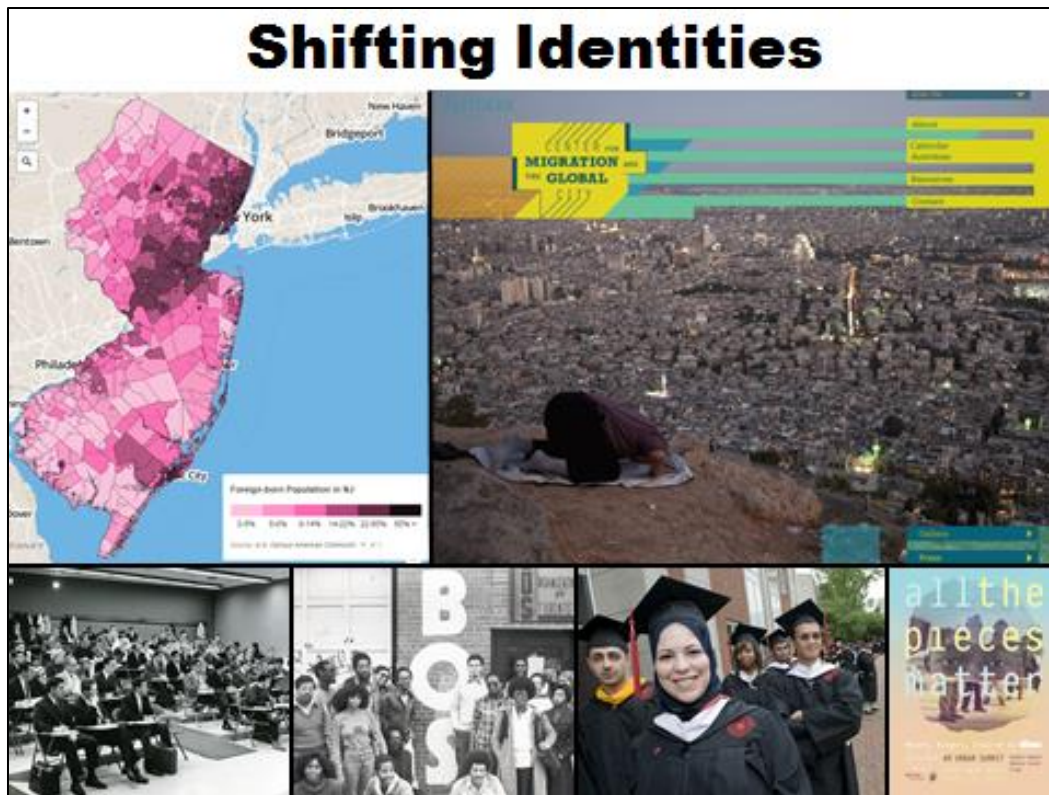


In the U.S., today, we aren’t even close to a society that regularly eschews this wariness for the interdependence that nurtures democracy, so we have some hard work to do. 60 years after *Brown v. Board*, we have increasingly racially, economically, and ethnically, segregated neighborhoods and schools, and we still debate fiercely over educational opportunity and the compelling interest of diversity in higher education; 50 years after President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty, we have staggering and growing inequality; 25 years after the invention of the world-wide web connected the world, we still engage in bitter territorial disputes that divide rather than unite; we now question how inclusive to make citizenship, flying in the face of the centuries during which our country has welcomed immigrant families, even as we never earnestly took responsibility for what we did to those indigenous first citizens whose lands we pillaged in the course of settling here, nor to those we forcibly brought here as slaves.



In other words, we have a lot of daily sacrifices to embrace if we are going to build a new geography, an embedded and expansive sense of place, and a strengthened network of trust. And in this regard, the United States is not alone. At the same time, we are all trying to imagine a different place, and that is encouraging.

I certainly see possibilities at my new home, Rutgers University-Newark, a place where there is no predominant racial or ethnic group amongst a student body dominated by individuals who are first generation in their families to enter higher education. A place where a faculty member in the humanities proudly reports that amongst his class of 40 students there are 17 different heritage languages spoken, leading his colleagues to suggest that we need an interdisciplinary program rooted in the inter-cultural translation of lives as embodied in communicating across languages. This is a place, as the title of one of the signature interdisciplinary centers, The Center for Migration and the Global City, suggests where the intersection of the “newest Americans” meets the history, resilience, sorrows and spirit of an iconic American city, defined as Newark is by having been home to waves of different groups reaching for prosperity and to generations struggling for freedom and civil rights.



Ian Watson, chair of our department of Arts, Culture, and Media, is working with a wonderful Polish non-governmental organization, the Borderland Foundation, to create an interdisciplinary exchange framed as The Urban Civic Initiative. He centers, not surprisingly, on the “premise that art can generate social change,” but we can extrapolate from that focus to consider all of the disciplines and languages and jargons that populate our institutions and that can form the basis for embracing a new, outward looking geography in higher education – one that practices building an affectionate community of trust, working with our neighbors as equals, not talking to them as strangers.

Building Communities of Trust

As one clear sign of a growing movement toward these new communities of trust, replacing the divisive and unequal landscape in which we typically live and work, the Anchor Institutions Task Force,⁶ started some years ago by Ira Harkavy and David Maurrasse, has over 400 members now. It includes colleges, universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions across the metropolitan map, all with a strong commitment to changing the map of opportunity in education, literacy, public health, entrepreneurship, justice, the environment, and much more. These anchor institutions, importantly, operate in their communities through shared action and reciprocal partnership, even as we educate a more engaged, socially responsible, and culturally skilled next generation of citizen-professionals.

⁶ See Anchor Institutions Task Force at <http://www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf/>.

Building Communities of Trust

HUFF POST URBAN PROGRESS

Anchor Institutions Task Force

MARGA INCORPORATED

THE BLOG

Jamie Merisotis
CEO/President, Lumina Foundation

Smart Growth: Creating Sustainable Cities Through Higher Education

THE ROSSE FOUNDATION, INC.

"A promising future for our nation rests on the ability of strong leaders from diverse backgrounds to develop consensus solutions to complex social problems."

The Road Half Traveled
University Engagement at a Crossroads

Rita Asatryan and Sierra Dabib

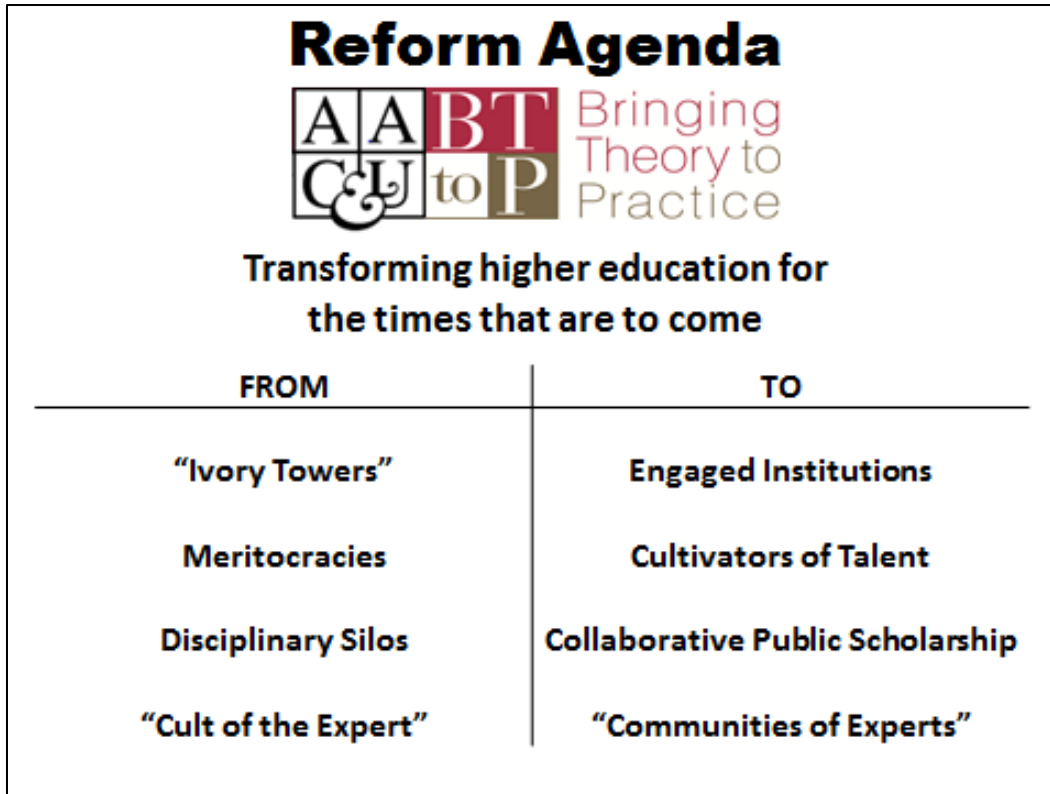
The Necessary Collaborative
of the University of Maryland
December 2018

Anchor Institution Mission

Harry Boyte evokes the legendary civil rights lyric, “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for,” to envision ourselves as citizens of a place, not on the side lines studying and working next to it.”⁷ But to enact this new geography, requires both “*knowing our place*,” as in having an appropriate level of modesty about how much we really know, and “*imagining our place*,” as in reaching beyond our knowledge in collaboration with others. These are not habits of mind or action well ingrained in higher education, as Peter Englot and I suggested in a recent essay in Jill Reich’s edited volume on the Civic Renewal of Higher Education.⁸ In fact, they will require some considerable course correction on all our parts to enact successfully.

⁷ Harry C. Boyte, *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap* (Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation, 2013).

⁸ Nancy Cantor and Peter Englot, “Civic Renewal of Higher Education through Renewed Commitment to the Public Good,” in Jill Reich (Ed.), *Civic Engagement, Civic Development, and Higher Education: New Perspectives on Transformational Learning, Bringing Theory to Practice*, Washington, DC, 2014, 3-12.



First, and perhaps most fundamental and challenging, as we move from ivory towers to engaged institutions, from the monastery to the marketplace,⁹ we have to be willing to jump into the contested fray of community life, not to be distanced, entirely neutral, always dispassionate. Those of us who work in urban school districts in the U.S. certainly see this in the tumult that accompanies most attempts at education reform, often well-meaning in principle but too top down in practice and more often than not sowing seeds of community distrust not trust and productive engagement.

In Newark, for example—where, counter to the U.S. norm, the public schools have been run by the State of New Jersey rather than the city for the past 30 years—the State’s efforts to turn severely under-performing schools into high-achieving ones are at odds with equally vital efforts to turn schools into centers of community where social, legal, health, safety, and environmental services can flourish and progressive interventions can change the fate of families and generations and whole neighborhoods. Recently, in fact, the civic dialogue has turned rather fierce, with faith-based leaders, many community groups, and a newly-elected Mayor objecting strenuously to plans for school reform.¹⁰ In this contested landscape, even where everyone is deeply committed to reversing the educational fate of our children, the role of higher education is

⁹ Cantor, N. & Schomberg, S. (March/April 2003). Poised between two worlds: The university as monastery and marketplace, *EDUCAUSE Review* 38 (2), 12-21.

¹⁰ Dale Russakoff, “Schooled: Cory Booker, Chris Christie, and Mark Zuckerberg had a plan to reform Newark’s schools. They got an education,” *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2014.

both critical – as convener, policy-analyst, partner – and yet not the least bit straightforward, especially as public institutions on the one hand, and yet engaged and active participants of and in the community, on the other. The risks in this frayed arena of anchor engagement are readily visible, even as the work is so vital.

Second, we need to thoroughly internalize the notion that an innovative society and an inclusive society go hand in hand, and look to break out of the narrow confines of our meritocracies to reconnect as true educators with the practices of talent cultivation, looking behind the obvious to see potential in a much wider array of citizens, students, and collaborators, than we typically select. This is certainly true as we consider who to admit to our universities, as we too often knee-jerk toward measures of achievement that disenfranchise and waste the talent of those we most need to engage.¹¹

This is also powerfully true of the work we do as anchor institutions in our communities, when we too quickly forget that complex problem-solving is enhanced by the diversity of the constituents genuinely talking across the table, even if it becomes messier the more perspectives are represented.¹² A central ingredient of democratic innovation is, after all, the ability and proclivity to work across difference (arrayed on many dimensions), and to get started we need to unpack the stereotypes that keep us apart. As Sherrilyn Ifill, president of the NAACP Legal and Education Defense Fund, put it, we are doomed to repeat a troubled history of exclusion and discord if we don't get over thinking, for example, that "all blacks are poor, all whites rich and all Latinos speak Spanish."¹³

And this call to build inclusive and engaged academic communities also applies to the way we do our scholarship, too often confined within disciplinary siloes, too often in isolation of others working on similar problems, too often enshrining a "cult of the expert," rather than embracing a fulsome "community of experts, with and without pedigrees."¹⁴ Fortunately, an appreciation of the shifting ways in which high-impact scholarship is conducted is emerging with some force in national and global circles, as seen in the European Horizon 2020 program of "Science with and for Society" and the Broader Impacts criterion and Broader Participation goals of the U.S. National Science Foundation.¹⁵ While the cultural and social disciplines have discussed these

¹¹ Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006); Nancy Cantor, "Diversity and Higher Education: Our Communities Need More Than 'Narrowly Tailored' Solutions," *Huffington Post*, August 2, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nancy-cantor/diversity-higher-education_b_3695503.html.

¹² Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Patricia Gurin, Biren A. Nagda, and Ximena Zúñiga, *Dialogue Across Difference: Practice, Theory, and Research on Intergroup Dialogue* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013).

¹³ Sherrilyn Ifill, "Race vs. Class: The False Dichotomy," *New York Times*, June 14, 2013, A27.

¹⁴ Harry C. Boyte, *Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert* (Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation, 2009).

¹⁵ See the European Commission's Horizon 2020, Science with and for Society Programme, <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/h2020-section/>; and the National Science Foundation's Broader Impact criterion and Broader Participation goal, <http://www.nsf.gov/>.

broader practices for some time, as described in *Imagining America's* study of “Scholarship in Public,”¹⁶ it is encouraging to see a similar inclusive embrace in the arena of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).



A final piece of the mind-shift in this new geography for higher education is how we think about responsibility for sustaining ideas, spaces, and innovations in the context of a new paradigm of “generative partnerships,” as Caryn McTighe Musil described it.¹⁷ These “connective corridors” stretch the norms of higher education in very clear ways as: traditional university-community boundaries are reimagined, partners employ democratic practices of decision-making, consensus-building, and shared control (or lack thereof), funding comes from many sources, and credit for success cannot be easily assigned, nor can blame for failures. These are long-term investments of human, social, intellectual, and cultural capital, dependent for sustenance on the shared good will of all participants and this, like democracy, requires herculean patience and perseverance. While universities show extreme reluctance to jettison departments or disciplines, the shelf life of

¹⁶ See Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University* (Syracuse, NY: Imagining America, 2008) and Nancy Cantor and Steven Lavine, “Taking Public Scholarship Seriously,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, B20.


¹⁷ Caryn McTighe Musil, “Connective Corridors and Generative Partnerships: A New Paradigm,” *Diversity&Democracy*, Winter 2013, Vol. 16, No.; see also, National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. 2012. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities., DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

community programs has been less enduring, and so to truly embrace our shared responsibility as generative anchor institutions does require deliberate attention.

Generative Partnerships

“Institutions and communities are developing a new paradigm for generative partnerships ... not done to but designed with a multifaceted group of stakeholders whose norms, resources, perspectives, and histories meet, greet, and collide in the crucible of community that binds one person’s welfare to another’s.”

Caryn McTighe Musil



By way of example, and returning for a moment to my home and the arena of education (preK-20+), we are a convener and collaborator at Rutgers University-Newark in one such generative partnership, the Newark City of Learning Collaborative or NCLC as we call it. The aim of NCLC is to increase the percentage of the residents of Newark who possess a post-secondary credential from 18% to 25% by 2025, as part of a metro city challenge from the Lumina Foundation. The partnership involves two research universities and a community college, schools across the city, community-based organizations that do pre-college interventions, local government agencies, and the philanthropic and corporate community. Not only are there competing approaches and interests to constantly keep track of in this messy but vital collaborative, as well as frequently changing faces of leadership at all levels, but there is also recognition that the whole is more important to this venture than is any one part – and so success depends upon the sustainability of the full collaborative network.

Tending to Democracy

And, this brings us back full circle to John Dewey – democracy, and the democratic innovations at its base, live in the relations of person to person, institution to institution, and cannot be taken for granted – not even for a moment. While the challenges in our communities are many, there is

no lack of will to take them on. But this requires building a new geography for higher education that looks outward, makes partnerships, takes social responsibility at home and beyond, and concertedly sustains the effort, placing as much emphasis on nurturing networks of change-makers as on completing any particular project. As such, it is perhaps appropriate to end by noting that our progress will be measured by our ability to continuously mobilize an inclusive pool of talent – inside and outside of higher education -- for the tasks at hand. And this in turn speaks to the values we want to promote, not just as neighbors and partners and colleagues, but as educators of the next leaders upon whom we will depend. As a U.S. national commission on the future of the humanities recently suggested, we will need:

“Citizens who are educated in the broadest possible sense, so that they can participate in their own governance and engage with the world. An adaptable and creative workforce....Elected officials and a broader public who exercise civil political discourse, founded on an appreciation of the ways our differences and commonalities have shaped our rich history.”

When we fulfill this charge, then democracy will be tended to and we will come to build communities of trust, neighbors, not strangers, with whom to talk and work and make change.

Tending to Democracy

American Academy of Arts & Sciences
The Heart of the Matter

“Who will lead America into a bright future? Citizens who are educated in the broadest possible sense, so that they can participate in their own governance and engage with the world. An adaptable and creative workforce. Experts in national security, equipped with the cultural understanding, knowledge of social dynamics, and language proficiency to lead our foreign service and military through complex global conflicts. Elected officials and a broader public who exercise civil political discourse, founded on an appreciation of the ways our differences and commonalities have shaped our rich history. We must prepare the next generation to be these future leaders.”

