

# Democratic Practice: Libraries and Education for Citizenship

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It is now six years since the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement released *A Crucible Moment*, with its call for colleges and universities in the United States to renew their commitment to the development of an informed and engaged citizenry.<sup>1</sup> The report was a response to a series of sobering trends. Some were long-standing, such as the low rate of voter participation among younger voters and poor performance on surveys of political knowledge among all segments of the population, but particularly among the marginalized. Other trends were more recent, such as a widely perceived rise in incivility and hyperpolarization. In today's political climate, which many experts view as even further polarized, the report's diagnosis of the enfeebled state of American democracy seems almost mild. Its recommendations, however, retain their cogency. The report contends that effective training for responsible citizenship requires not only the study of democratic institutions but also actual practice in democratic engagement.<sup>2</sup>

While libraries are hardly mentioned in *A Crucible Moment*, library spaces, collections, and expertise have a vital role to play in civic engagement efforts on campus. In fact, academic libraries are essential to the success of such efforts and well placed to lead these initiatives.

## Libraries and Democracy

The relationship between libraries and civic engagement is not new. Arguably the fundamental role of a library is for that very purpose—maximizing communally funded spaces, collections, and expertise to educate and inform in the broadest sense possible.

Public libraries, defined as a collection not affiliated with a parent institution such as a church or school, have existed for millennia. Recently, the remains of what appears to be an ancient library that dates to the Roman Empire were excavated in Germany. Archaeologists believe the structure, “in the middle of Cologne, in the marketplace or forum: the public space in the city centre” may once have housed 20,000 scrolls, available for use by local citizens.<sup>3</sup>

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But the public library—not always free nor accessible to all—evolved into its modern identity largely through the vision and generosity of Andrew Carnegie. A Scotsman born into a family of modest means, Carnegie grew up in Pittsburgh, where he succeeded in industry with no formal education, learning through books lent to him by a retired local merchant. From this experience, he came to believe “there was no use to which money could be applied so productive[ly] . . . as the founding of a public library.”<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the philanthropist Enoch Pratt, Carnegie envisioned that “his libraries would bring books and information to all people.”<sup>5</sup> According to the Carnegie Corporation, “Carnegie had two main reasons for supporting libraries. First, he believed that in America, anyone with access to books and the desire to learn could . . . be successful, as he had been. Second, Carnegie, an immigrant, felt America’s newcomers needed to acquire cultural knowledge of the country, which a library would help make possible.”<sup>6</sup>

By funding thousands of public libraries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Carnegie helped make possible the cultivation of a widely engaged citizenry. Notably, the vast sums Carnegie invested in this enterprise did not include sustaining endowments. He believed strongly that municipalities should demonstrate a commitment to this venture—affording all citizens equitable access to information—by providing fiscal support for libraries. Very quickly, public libraries became thriving marketplaces of ideas and social centers for gathering and mobilizing. These public libraries filled a critical need during an era when higher education was not accessible as broadly as it would become by the latter half of the twentieth century.

Around the same time, the concept of a Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) was born. Building upon practices for the distribution of congressional documents to state libraries, historical societies, and universities dating from the early nineteenth century, the Printing Act of 1895 exponentially expanded the reach of government information. It overhauled existing laws and reformed approaches to acquiring, printing, and disseminating content from all three branches of government. The Printing Act vested oversight authority in the U.S. Government Printing Office (now the Government Publishing Office). This landmark legislation revolutionized access to information by creating a network of libraries in which these materials—“created at taxpayer expense and as required by law”—would be “deposited” for free, in exchange for making them openly available to the public.<sup>7</sup> Depository libraries were never stand-alone structures; rather, they were housed within existing libraries of all types. With passage of the Depository Library Act of 1962, the program was further refined to support wide dissemination of information across congressional districts.<sup>8</sup> The FDLP mandate for public access led many college and university libraries, including those affiliated with private institutions, to throw open their doors to citizens at large, thereby reinforcing the essential role of the academic library in civic awareness.

During the decade when Carnegie libraries began springing up and access to government information was expanding, access to higher education similarly increased. This was accomplished through the passage of the second Morrill Act in 1890, which built on the first act of 1862. Together known as the Land-Grant Acts, these legislative mandates provided for instruction in “agriculture and the mechanical arts,” especially “for U.S. citizens of average means,” to foster an educated populace. Under the acts, land was granted by the government to states, with the proviso that those lands be either

used or sold to support higher education in agriculture, engineering, and other fields considered “practical” at the time. Further, the second act prohibited racial discrimination in admissions policies, incrementally advancing inclusivity.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent legislation broadened the mission of land-grant colleges beyond teaching to include research, initially through Agricultural Experiment Stations that investigated new farming techniques. Later, a third function was added. A network of County Extension Offices began sharing the results of agricultural research with farmers and consumers—another means of informing the citizenry. All land-grant colleges also were given status as federal depository libraries.

In these three examples, a private individual engaged the country, one community at a time, through libraries; the federal government disseminated its own information, also through libraries; and the states used federal resources to create institutions that improved society. Each of these efforts put libraries forward as the logical agents of change and civic engagement.

### Civic Engagement

How one thinks about education for citizenship depends upon how one understands citizenship itself. The classic ideal of an “informed citizen,” with its antecedents in ancient Greece, the writings of Thomas Jefferson, and elsewhere, came to fruition during the Progressive Era as a reaction to the excesses of party politics. The ideal informed citizen is independent minded, self-contained, self-motivated, engaged with the complexities of the modern world, and fully capable of making the informed choices necessary to self-government.<sup>10</sup> This manifestation of citizenship underlies most surveys of political knowledge and the traditional curriculum in “civics.” As with any ideal, actual practice falls short. Walter Lippmann famously declared, “I have not met anybody, from the President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the sovereign and omniscient citizen.”<sup>11</sup>

Marshaling a half century’s worth of survey data, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter argued in 1996 that voting-age citizens in the United States are ill-informed about politics and government. They asserted that levels of political knowledge have varied little in the last 50 years, and disparities in political knowledge among citizens “mirror their standings in the social, political, and economic world.”<sup>12</sup> More recent surveys of college seniors confirm this judgment.<sup>13</sup>

Progressive educational reformer John Dewey acknowledged the limited political understanding of the average citizen, but he maintained that an informed and engaged citizenry was possible. Dewey proposed that all human cognition is partial, embedded in the specifics of one’s social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Knowledge requisite to democracy is not, therefore, found in the mastery of incontrovertible political facts, but through experience in the practice of “debate and discussion and persuasion.”<sup>14</sup> In such a framework, the library should not merely provide access to information, but instead equip its users with the skills required to assess political arguments and provide opportunities to engage with others, building confidence and competency in democratic practice and gaining from different perspectives in the process.

*A Crucible Moment* outlined four elements needed in civic engagement education: democratic knowledge, skills, values, and collective action.<sup>15</sup> A traditional civic engagement curriculum includes the study of foundational texts, familiarity with the institutions and practices of democratic governance, and exposure to the ways in which socioeconomic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds may affect civic values. But civic engagement education also should include experience gathering multiple sources of evidence, analyzing them, and communicating one's conclusions effectively. This approach to democratic practice pushes beyond the bounds of campus and into the larger communities we inhabit, connecting civic engagement to broader notions of civic responsibility. Civic engagement is a political (if not necessarily partisan) commitment to "developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation" to make a difference.<sup>16</sup>

### The Library's Role

Libraries are positioned to lead in civic engagement because they have a head start. They are already communal institutions that gather resources based on user needs and share them efficiently for the benefit of all. To the extent a library (like an imperfectly informed citizen) may fall short of this ideal, it can be engaged with and improved, presenting a real opportunity for service learning. Moreover, participation in civic engagement efforts on campus benefits not only library users, but libraries themselves. Rather than merely adding a separate item onto a library leader's long to-do list, library-based civic engagement opportunities bring a fresh perspective to problems a library may be working to solve or needing someone to examine. Putting a library's imperative to remain relevant to the community it serves into the frame of civic engagement can elevate the discussion beyond a mere struggle for funding, and may provide practical opportunities for its energetic interns, staff, or librarians.

As academic libraries engage increasingly with the communities that surround them, occasions for the exchange of ideas Dewey advocated will emerge. Students, faculty, and library staff, as well as unaffiliated community members, often find that civic engagement education occurs naturally at outreach events and flows in multiple directions. Organizing such events can be an ideal assignment for anyone who wants to do meaningful work in the library. Uniquely among units in a university, the academic library is a venue for exchanging ideas that community members immediately understand and—given the popularity of public libraries—with which they may already feel connected. Over time, this kind of goodwill redounds to the benefit of the larger institution.

College campuses today foster active civic engagement in myriad ways. Mission statements and strategic plans at many institutions incorporate this focus, with intentional emphases on social justice, equity and inclusion, civil discourse, and service or experiential learning.<sup>17</sup> The promotion of global citizenship, with its shared responsibility for others worldwide, is increasingly underscored. Nongovernmental organizations active in this space have grown exponentially and are committed to supporting the education of students for responsible citizenship. Noteworthy groups include Campus Compact, dedicated to advancing "the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and educate students for civic and social responsibility"; the Civic Practices Network, comprised of educators and practitioners



committed to “civic revitalization”; and Civic Nation, an amalgam of numerous civic engagement initiatives.<sup>18</sup> In the aftermath of the call to action in *A Crucible Moment*, the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) launched its current signature initiative, Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. Its goal is to make civic and democratic education a national priority for all students. As part of this effort, AAC&U published *Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine across the Disciplines*, a framework for exploring what lines of civic inquiry are most amenable to individual departments, disciplines, and programs.<sup>19</sup>

Academic libraries are uniquely positioned to support civic learning throughout the curriculum. By lending their spaces, services, and expertise, they can become vital partners in this effort, demonstrating value to the campus community and beyond. Through reaffirming their origins as fundamentally *civic* institutions they can take a leading role in these efforts. Libraries embody the values and have the skills to promote social responsibility, civic learning, and critical thinking where they are most needed, better preparing students to participate in the democratic process. The time is right to engage.

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## Notes

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2. National Commission on Civic Renewal, *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do about It* (College Park, MD: National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998).
3. Alison Flood, “‘Spectacular’ Ancient Public Library Discovered in Germany,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/31/spectacular-ancient-public-library-discovered-in-germany>.
4. See Carnegie Corporation of New York, “Andrew Carnegie’s Story,” 2015, <https://www.carnegie.org/interactives/foundersstory/#!/>
5. John Surma and Leo Gerard, “Sunday Forum: The Importance of Libraries,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 13, 2008, <http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/08013/848584-35.stm>.
6. Carnegie Corporation of New York, “Andrew Carnegie’s Story.”
7. An Act Providing for the Public Printing and Binding and the Distribution of Public Documents, 28 Stat. 601 (1895).
8. Depository Library Program, 44 U.S.C. ch. 19 §1901 et seq.
9. See National Research Council, “History and Overview of the Land Grant College System,” chap. 1 in *Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities: A Profile* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1995), 1–17.
10. Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 144–87.
11. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993), 10–11. Originally published 1927 by Macmillan (New York).
12. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 271.

13. Intercollegiate Studies Institute, National Civic Literacy Board, *Failing Our Students, Failing America: Holding Colleges Accountable for Teaching America's History and Institutions* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2007).
14. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1954), 158 and 208.
15. National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment*, 4.
16. Thomas Ehrlich, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* (Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 2000), vi.
17. One noteworthy example of this can be seen in our own institution's strategic plan, *Plan 2020: Building a More Just, Humane, and Sustainable World*, <https://www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/president/pdfs/FINAL-LoyolaPlan2020-2015.pdf>.
18. For additional information, see Campus Compact, "Mission & Vision," 2016, <https://compact.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision/>; Center for Civic Education, <http://www.civiced.org/>; and Civic Nation, <https://civcnation.org/>.
19. Specific details at Association of American Colleges & Universities, "Civic Prompts: Civic Learning in the Major by Design," 2018, <https://www.aacu.org/civic-prompts>

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