

“Come, Let Us Reason Together”: New Research and the Public Good

GENE ANDREW JARRETT

The university is the prophetic school out of which come the teachers who are to lead democracy in the true path. It is the university that must guide democracy into the new fields of arts and literature and science. It is the university that fights the battles of democracy, its war-cry being: “Come, let us reason together.” (Harper 223)

For our era, the ability to search and research—sorting, evaluating, verifying, analyzing, and synthesizing abundant information—is an incredibly valuable skill. With the advent of Twitter and fake news, as well as the digitization of vast archives made accessible for the first time, these active learning skills should have a far larger role in higher education today. (Davidson 88)

STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD MASTER RESEARCH TO SOLVE THE GREAT SOCIETAL PROBLEMS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.

Research—as Cathy N. Davidson succinctly defines it above—is one of many crucial topics in her compelling new book *The New Education*. Looking at the literature and data on American universities Davidson describes in her study, I venture that new research could contribute to the public good as long as research universities continue to advance democracy. Theoretical and practical notions of democracy, of course, have evolved remarkably since America’s founding, oscillating between the ideological poles of “liberalism” and “illiberalism,” as some pundits have recently put it (Deneen 155–59). For the sense of American democracy anchoring my essay, I have in mind a “deliberative form of politics” that calls on “the demos to reflect upon itself and judge [the efforts of] laws, institutions, and leaders” to maintain the equality of social rights and privileges (Urbinati 16). The democratic prosperity of American society requires an increasingly diverse range of students to conduct new research on behalf of the intellectual and scholarly contributions of universities to the public good.

New research cannot reach its full potential, I infer from *The New Education*, as long as higher education continues to fall short of teaching students the skills they need to succeed today. Davidson

GENE ANDREW JARRETT is Seryl Kushner Dean of the College of Arts and Science and professor of English at New York University. He is the author and editor of numerous books on African American literature and literary criticism; he is also founding editor in chief of the African American studies module of *Oxford Bibliographies*, published online by Oxford University Press. He is completing a comprehensive biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

indicts the traditional course work for baccalaureate degrees at American universities—namely, the series of prerequisite and required courses, plus electives, students must take to complete a major. *The New Education* encourages us to question the viability of this kind of curriculum. More appropriate would be “an intellectual toolkit of ideas and tactics that are as interactive and dexterous as our post-Internet world demands” (Davidson 14). The tool kit includes a “student-centered pedagogy” of “active learning.” Students would “create new knowledge from the information around them” and confront the challenges presently afflicting the world (8).

“The New Education,” a two-part essay Charles William Eliot published in the February 1869 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, frames Davidson’s study. Appearing in print eight months before Eliot was appointed president of Harvard University, the essay makes the case for modernizing the antiquated curricula of American universities to educate the next generation of leaders. Evidently, German intellectual conceptions of the university from the first half of the nineteenth century influenced Eliot. “As were many of his contemporaries, Eliot was drawn to the University of Berlin (later renamed the Humboldt University of Berlin), which had been established in 1810 by the liberal educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt” (Davidson 27–28). Davidson rightly points out that Eliot had examined international models—not only German universities but French ones as well—to create a distinctive template of American higher education.

Even as *The New Education* seeks to outline a curriculum for the twenty-first century, the book’s detour through the German heritage of the modern research university proves crucial to its argument for both methodological and historical reasons.¹ In “The New Education,” Eliot himself alludes to the virtue of German higher education: “It is one hundred and thirty years since the first

German practical school (*Realschule*) was established, and such schools are now common” (231). Eliot appreciates the meaning of research, which enriches the mind. “In the college, the desire for the broadest culture, for the best formation and information of the mind, the enthusiastic study of subjects for the love of them without any ulterior objects, *the love of learning and research for their own sake, should be the dominant ideas*” (245; my italics). “College” education preceded and differed from the more specialized training that advanced undergraduates at that time may have sought for securing practical or vocational opportunities.

As a topic, “the love of learning and research for their own sake” had previously resonated deeply among German intellectuals who theorized the interface of research and teaching. It was probably in 1809 that Humboldt wrote “On the Internal Structure of the University in Berlin and Its Relationship to Other Organizations,” an incomplete original manuscript to which subsequent theorists and practitioners of higher education referred. The essay embraces research and does so in language that infuses Eliot’s own proposal for a new education in America. Humboldt argues that “if one central principle—*the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake*—finally gains the upper hand in our higher academic institutions . . . [s]uch institutions will be both unified and complete, qualities that seek and presuppose each other in a naturally reciprocal relationship. This is in fact the secret of a good scientific and scholarly method” (111; my italics). Research for Humboldt demands that faculty members and students demonstrate diligence, rigor, and a willingness to debate and collaborate, all for the intellectual and scholarly progress of humankind.

The development of human character even assumed a moral and ethical purpose. As Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon have indicated in the introduction to their edition of essays about the research

university, “Humboldt’s language embedded academic professionalization—the higher standards of entry and the division of intellectual labor according to specialization—in a set of ethical ideals that, over the course of the nineteenth century, came to be embodied by the individual scholar and his particular virtues” (Menand et al., Introduction 4–5). In the pursuit and production of knowledge, research represented a cherished ethic and ethics of academic activity. For Eliot’s contemporaries, in due course the advancement of knowledge came to accrue a social mission. When Daniel Coit Gilman accepted his appointment in 1875 as the president of Johns Hopkins University, he declared that this institution would be dedicated to “the discovery and promulgation of truth,” for “the spirit of a University should be that of intellectual freedom in pursuit of truth” (171, 172).

During William Rainey Harper’s time as president of the University of Chicago (from 1891 to 1906), he wrote “The University and Democracy,” an 1899 speech delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, that takes Gilman’s thesis a step further. Harper considers the specific ways in which the American research university fulfills the public good intrinsic to a healthy democracy. Sure, his claim that the university is “recognized by the people for resolving the problems of civilization which present themselves in the development of civilization” potentially exercises the social and cultural prejudices to which civilizationalist doctrines have historically fallen prey (218). Equally notable, the speech’s theological intonations are attributable to his training in and teaching of divinity and the Bible (Thelin 120). Nonetheless, he identifies higher education as a valuable site for preparing “leaders and teachers for every field of activity” and above all for the fulfillment of a democratic mission more consequential than conducting research merely for its own sake. Quoted at the beginning of this essay, Harper’s words are fleshed out here:

It is in the university that the best opportunity is afforded to investigate the movements of the past and to present the facts and principles involved before the public. It is the university that, as the center of thought, is to maintain for democracy the unity so essential for its success. *The university is the prophetic school out of which come the teachers who are to lead democracy in the true path. It is the university that must guide democracy into the new fields of arts and literature and science. It is the university that fights the battles of democracy, its war-cry being: “Come, let us reason together.”* It is the university that, in these latter days, goes forth with buoyant spirit to comfort and give help to those who are downcast, taking up its dwelling in the very midst of squalor and distress. It is the university that, with impartial judgment, condemns in democracy the spirit of corruption which now and again lifts up the head, and brings scandal upon democracy’s fair name. (223; my italics)

Research publishes “the facts and principles,” a phrase akin to Gilman’s aforementioned advocacy of “the discovery and promulgation of truth,” for the public good. In today’s world, the term “public good” encapsulates Davidson’s proposal for a new education that inculcates in students sophisticated research skills so that they can contend with “the advent of Twitter and fake news” (88). In addressing the plethora of information and misinformation circulating throughout a variety of media and technology platforms, Davidson anticipates the day when, in strategic response to “fake news,” companies would welcome hiring students who have learned “the ability to search and research” (88). Indeed, on New Year’s Day in 2018, A. G. Sulzberger, the new publisher of *The New York Times*, reaffirmed the newspaper’s realization of “the foundational assumption of common truths, the stuff that binds a society together.”²² The new education, as it invigorates new research, seems poised to arm students with precisely the critical methods

and methodologies they need to explore these "common truths."

Alas, the public value of higher education has diminished of late, and the population and diversity of students who could become new researchers have suffered constraints. Over the past four decades, signals relayed from "our nation's policymakers" that higher education is "a luxury rather than a public good" have reinforced the view that American universities perpetuate an elitist social and economic class (Davidson 172), even though such institutions still contribute more than half of "the nation's total basic research across fields" (230). The upward mobility of under-represented groups (classified not only by race and ethnicity but also by gender, sexuality, class, and region) accompanied "the golden age of quality mass higher education," which extended from the GI Bill after World War II to the initial decline of government spending on higher education three decades later. During this golden age, government financing assumed that strengthening higher education improved the social and economic opportunities of working- and middle-class people in America. At the same time, this financing sought to bolster the democratic foundations of American society against the international threats of fascism and totalitarianism.

Current perceptions of higher education as a public good remain tempered somewhat by the evidence, some empirical and some anecdotal, that the commercial pursuit of prestige—"the coin of the realm among the leading research universities and liberal arts colleges," writes David L. Kirp—has consistently distracted universities from the democratic priority of public service (4). Yet the historical success of higher education cannot be ignored. In the wake of the GI Bill, according to Davidson, for the first time a remarkable number of ethnic European Americans enrolled in college. Moreover, the racial desegregation of public schools through the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of*

Education, coupled with the aforementioned government financing of higher education, granted African Americans access to academic research and resources that they hitherto had been denied. Higher education became socially transformative when its own goods and services became more democratized.

Arguing that the public good of American universities lies in the democratization of their own academic research and resources can be perceived as ironic. To support this claim, I began my essay, by way of Davidson's fine study, with historic educators of the nineteenth century who may not have been the most progressive or exceptional in thinking about, much less implementing, the diversification of academic society and its research enterprise. Yet "the new education" of long ago and the repurposing of it today share an important sense of urgency about the future of the American university: without widespread support for new research, the nation's democratic health may be in peril.

NOTES

1. In their introduction to the collection *The Rise of the Research University*, the editors note that "[c]alls for new modes of organization as well as attempts to defend core structures," with respect to the "mission of research universities in the United States," "seldom engage with the history of the research university, and particularly with the issue of its German heritage, in a meaningful way" (Menand et al., Introduction 1).

2. Sulzberger describes the importance of solid journalistic research to democracy, research that serves as an analogue to the academic kind I have been describing in this essay: "The business model that long supported the hard and expensive work of original reporting is eroding, forcing news organizations of all shapes and sizes to cut their reporting staffs and scale back their ambitions. Misinformation is rising and trust in the media is declining as technology platforms elevate clickbait, rumor and propaganda over real journalism, and politicians jockey for advantage by inflaming suspicion of the press. Growing polarization is jeopardizing even the foundational assumption of common truths, the stuff that binds a society together."

WORKS CITED

- Davidson, Cathy N. *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Basic Books, 2017.
- Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale UP, 2018.
- Eliot, Charles William. "The New Education." Menand et al., *Rise*, pp. 230–47.
- Gilman, Daniel Coit. "The Utility of Universities." Menand et al., *Rise*, pp. 170–86.
- Harper, William Rainey. "The University and Democracy." Menand et al., *Rise*, pp. 217–25.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. "On the Internal Structure of the University in Berlin and Its Relationship to Other Organizations." Menand et al., *Rise*, pp. 108–12.
- Kirp, David L. *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*. Harvard UP, 2003.
- Menand, Louis, et al. Introduction. Menand et al., *Rise*, pp. 1–12.
- , editors. *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*. U of Chicago P, 2017.
- Sulzberger, A. G. "A Note from Our New Publisher." *The New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/01/opinion/Arthur-Gregg-Sulzberger-The-New-York-Times.html.
- Thelin, John R. *A History of American Higher Education*. 2nd ed., Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.
- Urbinati, Nadia. *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. U of Chicago P, 2006.